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**THE RIGHT TO THE CITY: FRANCISCO'S CHINATOWN BEFORE AND AFTER
THE 1906 EARTHQUAKE**

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**In partial fulfillment of a Bachelor of Arts Degree in Environmental Analysis,
2021 academic year, Scripps College, Claremont, California**

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Abstract

The development of San Francisco, much like many American cities, is deeply entwined with the spatial process of settler-colonialism. Fueled by White supremacist processes of appropriation, dispossession and exclusion, city officials and White San Franciscans legally, financially, and socially segregated Chinese immigrants who entered into the U.S. context to a dense and degraded ethnic enclave. Henri Lefebvre and David Harvey theorize on The Right to the City, the social production of space and the ways in which social processes can be concretized by space. This thesis applies these concepts to the racialized space of San Francisco's Chinatown. An examination of the destruction of Chinatown and much of the city after San Francisco 1906 earthquake offers unique insights into the continuation of these social processes which designate worthy or unworthy inhabitants of the city. In resisting displacement, many Chinatown residents and business owners chose to redefine their neighborhood to centralize desirability and acceptability to White tourists. While the community succeeded in its goal, the built environment that resulted did not give them the Right to the City but instead elevated the cultural experience and goods they could offer to the wider city.

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Preface

San Francisco is just an hour away from where I was born. I was fascinated with San Francisco's Chinatown as a subject because it is the home and history of people like me, and a place I very easily could have had a deep connection to. Chinatowns have played important roles in my family members' lives, yet when I was growing up, they were never a significant part of mine. I have experienced Chinatowns from a somewhat Western lens and found in this project the chance to understand something that I may have taken at face value as something deeply rooted in the resilience and autonomy of the Chinese community. I am in no way an Asian American studies expert, nor am I a sociology or history expert. Constantly throughout the research process I have become aware of the enormous amount of information that I could, but for clarity and sanity's sake probably should not delve into. This project has become as much an exploration of my own identity and outlook as it is a research process into the history of a marginalized population fighting displacement.

I came to the subject of Chinatown during the 1906 San Francisco earthquake because I am interested in urban space. I am interested in design within urban space, and in rooting that process in history and theory. After the earthquake destroyed much of the city, an entire neighborhood was rebuilt to fit the White American taste of Chinese culture, much in the way Chinese cuisine, with the invention of chop suey, was redefined for a White American palette. It boggled my mind to think that aesthetics and architecture had the power to define the lives of Asian people living in American cities for the next century, as Chinatowns across the country followed the model of San Francisco and developed their neighborhoods accordingly. The idea that some Chinese people living in the United States would self-exoticize in order to gain mainstream acceptance pulled me in two directions. I was appreciative of the resilience and

resourcefulness of Chinese people. I was proud of their successful mobilization around a common goal. Yet I could not help but feel that the result was degrading, or in some way incomplete. I wanted to explore the social, economic and legislative factors which made this self-exotification necessary to secure the lasting right to remain in their historic neighborhood.

This was the shape of my project when sheltering in place began due to COVID-19. Since then, it has continued to gain new dimension as my research has broadened and as unaddressed Sinophobia has bubbled to the front of our collective consciousness. Asian populations throughout the world are once again racial scapegoats for the difficulties of other nations. I as much as anyone have had to orient myself away from the trivialization of violence against AAPI communities, and the myth of their overall “success” as minorities. We oscillate between the designation of a model minority who has flourished in a capitalist, settler-colonial U.S. as is – a myth used to undercut the experience of Black and Indigenous people in America; and as a foreign, sinister, existential threat to Western civilization. China has been demonized by Western countries for ages, and the U.S. has enacted endless imperialist aggression against Asian and Pacific countries. At home in the U.S., usually so well disguised, the dominant Western imagination has pushed us back towards the unabashed designation of existential threat this past year. Political figures in the highest positions of government have equated both Chinese people and the China itself with disease and death. During the Vice-Presidential debate, Mike Pence praised his administration for closing borders to China, stating that it must have saved hundreds of thousands of lives.¹ AAPI communities have suffered utter abandonment and economic

¹ Page, S. (2020, October 08). Read the full transcript of vice presidential debate between Mike Pence and Kamala Harris.

stagnation as their neighborhoods are avoided as a site of contagion.² AAPI elders are being assaulted, mugged, and killed in the Bay Area.³ In March, eight people, six of whom were Asian women, were killed by a man who committed a series of mass shootings at three Asian-owned massage parlors in Atlanta. He supposedly did so to quell his sexual temptation, the symptom of a sex addiction which ran contrary to his religious beliefs. The obvious interplay of race and gender in this event has been downplayed in media, sympathizing more with the White man attempting to uphold his Christian morals than the Asian women whose lives he took and whose bodies he felt entitled to fetishize, demonize and murder.⁴

His murderous actions are part of a long and violent history. In the mid-to-late 1800s, journalists and lawmakers alike equated all Chinese women to prostitutes, and regulated their lives, bodies and ability to immigrate accordingly. The associations with uncleanness, disease, density, degeneracy, and sexual deviancy endure, and I have been newly cognizant of its consistency over more than a century. I have since revised my question from “why was this self-exotification necessary to survive” to “did this self-exotification gain acceptance or improve conditions for Asian people in America at all?” The physical space suggests otherwise. The virulent hate does as well. The ways that history is eerily echoed by the present shows me that the same systemic forces and social myths working to oppress us are still very much a part of our society.

² Williams, S. (2021, February 12). Covid-19: Chinatowns fighting racism and pandemic to survive.

³ Westervelt, E. (2021, February 12). Anger and fear as Asian American seniors targeted in Bay Area attacks.

⁴ Yuen, N. (2021, March 18). Atlanta SPA shooting suspect's 'bad day' defense, and America's sexualized racism problem.

Introduction

With immigration beginning just two years after the U.S. conquest of California, the entry of Chinese immigrants into the city of San Francisco and the larger American political landscape was deeply entwined with the imperial westward expansion of United States. The violent appropriation of the lands of the American West was obscured under the White supremacist narrative of Manifest Destiny – European Americans’ God-given mission to extend their imperial reach to the West coast, benevolently bringing with them capitalism, Protestantism, and Western formulations of civilization. The experiences of Chinese people in California highlighted another instance of the application of this ideology.

The Chinatown in San Francisco is the oldest in the country. San Francisco served as the first main portal to the U.S. for incoming Chinese immigrants, starting in earnest after the discovery of gold in California in 1848. Most coming from the Guangdong Province as miner-prospectors, artisans, merchants and students, over 300,000 immigrants entered the U.S. between 1852 and 1882, when the Chinese Exclusion Act was passed. Many others arrived as part of an “international migration of labor from Asia linked to the global expansion of European capitalism,” finding work in the West in mines, railroad lines, farmlands, fisheries and factories.⁵ Him Mark Lai describes the motivation for the migration as this:

After China was defeated in the Opium War by Britain and forced to open to outside trade and political domination, life for the Chinese people in Guangdong Province deteriorated. Aside from suffering increased taxes, forfeiture of land, competition from imported manufactured goods, and unemployment, they also had to contend with problems of overpopulation, natural calamities, bandits, and the devastation caused by peasant rebellions and the ongoing Punti-Hakka interethnic feud. Because of their

⁵ Yung, Judy, Gordon H. Chang, and H. Mark Lai. 2006. *Chinese American Voices : From the Gold Rush to the Present*.

coastal location and their early contact with foreign traders, many were drawn to America by news of the gold rush and by labor contractors in search of young, able-bodied men to work in the New World.⁶

Chinese laborers contributed greatly to the United States economy in mining, fishing, agriculture, construction of the railroads, telegraph lines, and other occupations. Yet, upon the completion of the transcontinental railroad and the economic downturn of the 1870s, European Americans painted them as cultural threats, labor competition, and racial inferiors.⁷

This widespread racial anxiety drove social, economic, and legislative violence towards Chinese immigrants in the form of Foreign Miners' Taxes, immigration exclusion, lootings, lynchings, and burnings of Chinese settlements. As Him Mark Lai writes, "The message behind the anti-Chinese movement was evident: the Chinese were tolerated as long as there was use for their labor to help develop the economic infrastructure of the American West. Racist attitudes, policies, and practices sought to prevent them from settling down, owning land, becoming naturalized citizens, intermarrying, or integrating into mainstream society."⁸ History shows the prevalence of these attitudes in wealthy White San Franciscans, working-class European-American immigrants, writers and editors of the press, and government officials from the local to the federal level at the end of the nineteenth century. Many Chinese laborers stayed in or returned to San Francisco after the completion of the transcontinental railroad, finding employment in cigar making, shoe making, and textiles.⁹ Chinese labor, businesses and bodies were almost immediately heavily regulated in attempts to protect the value of White labor, White morality, Western culture, and race and class segregation.

⁶ *Chinese American Voices : From the Gold Rush to the Present*. p.1

⁷ this synthesis is based on Judy Yung & Him Mark Lai
Yung, J., Chang, G. H., & Lai, H. M. (2006). *Chinese American Voices : From the gold rush to the present*.

⁸ *Chinese American Voices : From the Gold Rush to the Present*. p.1

⁹https://www.foundsf.org/index.php?title=The_Workingmen's_Party_%26_The_Denis_Kearney_Agitation

The Chinatown neighborhood in San Francisco became one of many physical landscapes in which this ideological battle erupted. The debates about the presence of the Chinese in the city, and of the Chinatown neighborhood as a contested terrain can be understood in part through the theoretical insights of French Marxist sociologist Henri Lefebvre (1901-1991). He theorized extensively on the social production of space, cities, and everyday life. One of his key concepts is *Le Droit à la Ville* or *The Right to the City*, which Lefebvre conceptualized as the “renewed right to urban life.”¹⁰ While he focuses primarily on hierarchies of class and the role of the working class in the development of the urban which breaks from capitalist commodification and consumption, Lefebvre provides us with a vital framework for the exploration of Chinese immigrants’ right to urban space within a city which developed as an imperialist, capitalist hub in the West around mining, trade, industry and finance. Furthermore, his definition of “inhabitant” has the potential to be imbued with the intersection and diverse identities of occupants of cities.¹¹ In this thesis, I add dimension to the generalized “inhabitant” by encompassing and focusing my attention on the racial, cultural, and gender identities of Chinatown residents within their historic neighborhood, especially as they are opposed by the White working class and ruling/owning class. Lefebvre’s concept of Right to the City has been reclaimed by countless academics and movements for social justice as a call to reclaim cities as a co-created space. In Lefebvre’s words it is a revolutionary call for the reorganization of the ways urban and social spaces are produced: “Only groups, social classes and class fractions capable of revolutionary initiative can take over and realize to fruition solutions to urban problems. It is from these social and political forces that the renewed city will become the *œuvre*. The first thing

¹⁰ Lefebvre. *The Right to the City in Writings on Cities*. p. 64

¹¹ Purcell, M. (2002). Excavating Lefebvre: The right to the city and its urban politics of the inhabitant.

to do is to defeat currently dominant strategies and ideologies.”¹² The following thesis aims to take the first steps towards this by questioning the existing urban space of San Francisco Chinatown and deconstructing the systemic forces which shaped it.

One of Lefebvre’s interpreters, David Harvey, argues in *Social Justice in the City* that it is necessary to deconstruct how individuals or dominant identities bring their cultural and social perceptions into physical form. There is, he notes, a relationship between “the social processes in the city and the spatial form which the city assumes.”¹³ He refers to this connection as a “spatial consciousness” or “geographical imagination,” which allows an individual to understand the role of space in their and others’ lives, to recognize the ways in which interactions are affected and facilitated by space, and to judge the relevance of spaces around them in relation to themselves and others. It allows an individual to “fashion and use space creatively.”¹⁴ Harvey asserts that spatial consciousness relies heavily on intuition, and in Western cultures is mainly seated in plastic arts. In a settler-colonial context, the Western ideology behind the production of urban space was a dominant, oppressive one. Using Lefebvre’s Right to the City and Harveys concept of “spatial consciousness” as a critical framework for this thesis, the following sections will examine the decision-making process around urban space under the dual forces of commodification and racism. This analysis is focused within a timeframe of rapid urban change – the first half-century of San Francisco’s formation and the rebuilding of the city after the 1906 earthquake and subsequent fires.

Understanding how physical space and access to urban life for the Chinese population was regulated according to the social dynamics and ideologies of White San Franciscans is the

¹² Lefebvre. *Writings on Cities*. p. 61

¹³ Summary from Chapter 1: *Social Processes and Spatial Form*
Harvey, D. (2009). *Social Justice and the City*. p. 23.

¹⁴ Harvey. (2009) p. 24.

focus of Part 1. Whites perceived the Chinese population as swarming, dirty, deviant, and slave-like, a narrative that had material ramifications for their living conditions and space, and justified an early form of environmental racism in the United States.¹⁵ These attitudes stemmed from the Eurocentric colonial ideology informing the spatial consciousness of decisionmakers. They were inextricably entrenched in White supremacy, racial capitalism, and an imperialist imagined heritage to Classical times and the “Old World.” These attitudes drove legislation and policing which criminalized, destabilized and isolated the Chinese residents. This section examines the anti-Chinese sentiment and actions of The Workingmen’s Party after the economic downturn of 1870, including a later attempt to evict the entire neighborhood on the grounds of public health. The social perceptions, media, tourism, and legal actions concerning Chinatown and its residents created cycles of spatial inequality which produced dense, dirty, under-resourced urban conditions which both fed into and were justified by racist attitudes of cultural and racial inferiority.

When the 1906 earthquake and subsequent fires destroyed much of the city of San Francisco and the entirety of Chinatown, many saw the convenient removal of Chinatown from the urban landscape as the will of God. Media and government officials alike had lamented Chinatown’s obstruction to potential White business and wide avenues since the rise of the financial district. Therefore, upon Chinatown’s destruction, the White elites of San Francisco were delighted at the work the disaster had done in their interest, while simultaneously dismayed at the presence of displaced Chinese refugees in the Bay area. Part 2 examines these events through individual accounts, news sources, and historical essays. Works such as *Seismic City : An Environmental History of San Francisco's 1906 Earthquake*, by Joanna Dyl and *Recovering*

¹⁵ Dyl, J. (2017). *Seismic City: An Environmental History of San Francisco's 1906 earthquake*.

Inequality: Hurricane Katrina, the San Francisco Earthquake of 1906, and the Aftermath of Disaster by Steve Kroll-Smith are key points of reference in this section as each of them deconstruct the effects of the earthquake on the Chinese population through unique lenses. Dyl frames these events in terms of environmental injustice while Kroll-Smith examines vernaculars of worthiness based on “market viability.” Both name the process of “accumulation by dispossession” by which government officials attempted to accumulate the urban space of Chinatown by relocating it to Hunters Point. Chinese refugees were criminalized as looters and reordered in space through the militaristic protection of White private property. These methods of recreating spatial inequality rely on the same ideologies which elevate White property owners and demonizes working classes and racial minorities.

Only through the exertion of unique privileges and appeals to certain values within a capitalist society were they able to remain in their historic neighborhood. Upon rebuilding, the neighborhood was reimagined as an Eastern fantasy for White tourists, creating renewed acceptability and desirability for Chinatown in the heart of the city. Both Dyl and Kroll-Smith look to the success of Chinese residents in avoiding displacement as a sort of victory, in which Chinese residents express desire to be a part of the wider city and experience rebounded recovery due to their market worthiness. However, I argue that the rebuilding of Chinatown, although the best solution available to them, was not a manifestation of the Right to the City, but a continuation of urban space produced under the dominant strategies and ideologies. Chinese residents were forced to lean into the role of cultural exhibit and “other” to be consumed, profited from, and excluded from the ideological White City.

While playing into systems of White supremacy and capitalism benefited them in their goal of avoiding displacement, it did not subvert the underlying conditions of disenfranchisement

and dispossession. The rebuilding of the city created a state of survival dependent on White tourism, which places no emphasis on their inherent worthiness as inhabitants of the city. Instead, their material conditions hinged on the success of the commodification of their “cultural authenticity.” Harvey states that “We must relate social behaviour to the way in which the city assumes a certain geography, a certain spatial form. We must recognize that once a particular spatial form is created it tends to institutionalize and, in some respects, to determine the future development of social process.”¹⁶ Through an examination of Chinatown at the beginning of the twentieth century, I hope to contribute to a more robust understanding of the historical basis of our urban spaces and social processes, allowing us to question existing and ever-developing urban space.

¹⁶ Harvey. (2009). p. 27.

Part 1: Vying for the heart of the City - “Yellow Peril” and the legislative and ideological planning for a White progressive utopia 1848-1906

The construction of urban space cannot be separated from economic, political and social factors. As Lefebvre writes, “Space has been shaped and moulded from historical and natural elements, but this has been a political process. Space is political and ideological.”¹⁷ In San Francisco, societal, and economic forces were already generating spatial inequality along lines of race and class before the destruction of the city in 1906. Harvey’s term of “spatial consciousness” is deeply intertwined with systems of power. White San Franciscans composed the dominant voices in local and federal government, urban planning and architecture, business, and even political parties organizing for labor rights. Urban space formed according to the values of those who were included and accepted into this dominant social sphere – and according to those who were not. In the case of San Francisco at the turn of the twentieth century, those who were included in that sphere were progressive White San Franciscans. Those who were excluded from the Right to the City were working class immigrants and people of color.

Spatial inequality was generated at the physical level through social ideologies that validated choices made by governmental bodies and economic authority figures. The Right to the City was repeatedly withheld from Chinatown residents through the construction by White San Franciscans of a negative Chinese identity. This created the widespread perception that they did not deserve their already restricted space in the city. White equation of them as “diseased,” “unsanitary,” or “immoral” was based in the same White supremacist foundation as that of westward expansion of the United States. Through this lens I will examine the heritage of city

¹⁷ (Lefebvre, 1977, p.341) in *Lefebvre’s politics of Space: Planning the Urban As oeuvre*. Zieleniec, A. (2018). p. 7

planning movements which harkened back to colonial ideals. Because of this, violence against Chinatown residents in the form of discriminatory legislation, criminalization, and dispossession was accepted and even celebrated as the moral improvement of the city.

The City Beautiful Movement as the Progressive San Franciscan urban ideal and its conceptual ties to the White Bourgeoisie

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the City Beautiful Movement swept across the U.S. as an effort to counter the negative effects of urbanization and create more livable cities. A Progressive Era ambition for the beautification of cities, the City Beautiful Movement dovetails with the interests and imaginations that White San Franciscans and government officials held in their vision for planned urban space. This movement gained widespread support across the U.S., drawing from the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition and from European cities, specifically Paris under the urban renewal of Haussmann. The architectural vocabularies of both the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition and Haussmann's renovation of Paris were constructed as ideals of "Western" civilization and were part of colonial processes of affirming empires and establishing Whiteness as a social norm. They gloried in the top-down production of spatial inequality, in one case dispossessing working classes from the center-city and in another creating an imagined racially segregated space - the White City - from which cultural, racial, and ethnic minorities were excluded and put on display for enjoyment by White "elites." City Beautiful proponents sought to form an identity of Whiteness, civilization, and nationalism through definitions of morality, health, and beauty in physical space. Understanding the roots of this imagined identity is important in understanding how the legacy of violence against Chinatown residents was continued under the name of the common good. Racial minorities, most significantly Chinese and then later Japanese immigrants, were constantly framed in

juxtaposition to this ideal as a culturally inferior other to justify exclusion from urban space, resources, and social life. The earthquake was seen as an opportunity to implement a vision of an ideal San Francisco, specifically a San Francisco that was “beautiful,” with increased scale for consumption and circulation of goods and services without the visible stain of working class or immigrant populations in the “fashionable” center of the city.

The massive urban renewal of Paris under Haussmann and Napoleon III is a vital parallel to explore in order to understand the City Beautiful Movement because of the similarities in physical form and social ideals. The city of Paris was a named influence of the “Father of City Beautiful,” Daniel Burnham, and prominent San Francisco city official James Phelan. Starting in the mid-1850s during the Second French Empire and continuing into the beginning of the twentieth century, it directly preceded and informed the Progressive Era spread of City Beautiful urban renewal in the United States. With ideas based in “creative destruction,” Haussmann led the dissection of the city - implementing infrastructure such as sewage systems and aqueducts, standardizing the facades and dimensions of buildings, and cutting huge boulevards, or *percées*, through the dense urban fabric for the circulation of air, people, light, and commercial goods.

These interventions were outwardly meant to address density, crime, unsanitary conditions and widespread disease. In the process of creating these *percées* he also destroyed thousands of homes, most often in poor, working class neighborhoods. Cutting *percées* through poor neighborhoods was a form of social control - destabilizing and displacing the source of much civil unrest. They created wide streets with prospects towards monuments that enforced national pride, and physical dimensions that made them impossible to barricade. It also segregated the city by class. After the evictions of the working class from the inner city,

conditions in the direct outskirts of the city became worse and worse. Ann-Louise Shapiro states: “There was no public attempt to rehouse those displaced by demolitions, and private industry failed to take up the task, preferring rather to chase the windfall profits of the luxury housing market.”¹⁸ The production of space in the city prioritized the accumulation of wealth, space, and power for an elite class under the guise of urban renewal and improvement of living conditions for all. The emphasis on public health and commercial scale allowed for popular perception of this renovation as entry into modern consumerist lifestyles.

David Harvey comments on another ulterior motive of this renovation project in *Paris, Capital of Modernity*. Nineteenth-century France witnessed extreme civil unrest and political instability as the government swung between empire, monarchy, and republic. Haussmann’s drastic restructuring of the urban fabric of Paris constituted a “founding myth” of a new regime.¹⁹ In other words, the upheaval and redefinition of urban space affirmed the political validity of Napoleon III. Undertaking such a massive urban renewal project based on centralized, authoritarian power implied that “the republican, democratic, and socialist proposals and plans of the 1830s and 1840s were impractical and unworthy of consideration.”²⁰ The only feasible solution was embedded in the authority of the Empire. Napoleon III simultaneously increased France’s colonial empire from 300,000 square kilometers to over a million with the acquisition of territories in Asia, Africa, and the Pacific.²¹ Emmanuelle Guenot describes the link between

¹⁸ Shapiro, A. (1982). *Housing Reform in Paris: Social Space and Social Control*. p. 487

¹⁹ Harvey, D. (2004). *Paris, Capital of Modernity*

²⁰ Harvey. (2004). Introduction.

²¹ Guenot, E. (2016). Napoleon III and France’s colonial expansion: National grandeur, territorial conquests and colonial embellishment, 1852–70. In Aldrich R. & McCreery C. (Eds.), *Crowns and colonies: European monarchies and overseas empires*

urban renewal in Paris and France's colonies overseas in *Crowns and colonies: European monarchies and overseas empires*:

Urban development occurred not only for the purpose of projecting the power of the *métropole* in the colonies but also to facilitate military deployment against any local opposition to colonial control. Moreover, such building programmes helped to provide a visual contrast between the European and indigenous quarters since this separation served to define 'otherness' and imposed a critical distance needed for surveillance. The construction of grand buildings to affirm colonial power was not new, but, under the Second Empire, the aggrandisement of key colonial cities was carried out simultaneously in Saigon, Algiers, Pondicherry and Dakar, and such colonial 'Haussmannisation' helped consolidate colonial power.²²

As the center of the French Empire, Paris was the center of the erasure of slavery, exploitation, and exported labor. However, the physical form of Haussmann's Paris was expanded into France's colonized territories both as a validation of the empire and to construct a contrast between the worlds of the "East" and the "West."²³ For example, in Algiers, "urban changes accentuated the hierarchical and well laid-out European zone in contrast to the 'chaotic' and densely populated casbah."²⁴ This creation of new or mini Parises within colonial cities bears a striking resemblance to the cities of the settler-colonial U.S. within which the settler-state called on the same architectural and urban vocabulary with similar goals of asserting spatial domination by affirming constructed racial superiority.

The idea of Haussmannian creative destruction disseminated into concepts of the City Beautiful Movement. While elements of racial hierarchy and exotification existed in addition to classism surrounding Haussmann's renovation of Paris, the United States context encompassed the unique conditions of the settler state. In particular a settler state that was founded on the

²² Guenot, E. (2016). p. 221

²³ Guenot, E. (2016).

²⁴ Guenot, E. (2016). p. 222

displacement and genocide of Indigenous peoples, violation of treaties, and continued occupation of their ancestral lands. It was founded on racial capitalism, and the enslavement of Black people. As Anne Bonds and Joshua Inwood argue, the construction of Whiteness is vital to settler nations such as the U.S., Australia, New Zealand, Israel, Canada, South Africa, Argentina and Brazil: “One cannot make sense of the epistemic norms of whiteness in settler nations without also taking into account the nature of settler colonialism. Theories of whiteness that do not engage with indigenous geographies and the ongoing processes of colonization not only risk reinforcing the disappearance of Native peoples, they minimize the multiple processes of racialization producing race-class identities in these places.”²⁵ These processes of reinforcing the norms of Whiteness through Indigenous erasure from the land itself as well as through the creation of race-class identities is clearly exemplified by the design, ideals, and spatial organization of Chicago’s White City in 1893.

The White City at the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago was the jumping-off point of the City Beautiful Movement in the United States. Daniel Burnham was the Director of works for World’s Columbian Exposition and later gained the title of “Father of City Beautiful.” He created plans for cities across the country according to a vision which first materialized with the design of this event. The White City was a recreation area of the exposition - a city within the city for fairgoers to traverse which had supposedly solved urban issues of the time. Although more staged than real, it depicted a vision for U.S. cities that used grand, neo-classical aesthetics and monumentality to show nationalist glory. Its white sparkling buildings, avenues, and fountains aesthetically justified the name, White City, and its ordering of physical

²⁵ Bonds, A., & Inwood, J. (2016). Beyond white privilege: Geographies of white supremacy and settler colonialism. p. 718.

space by race further illuminated the grand ideal of a “White” city in terms of people. The exposition expressed a desire to show that the U.S. was on par with Europe culturally and proposed a vision for the supposed height of civilization. That this interpretation of the height of civilization held a strong association with Whiteness was clear.

The grounds were composed of two main features – the main site of the White City and the Midway Plaisance, a grand avenue lined with exhibits which led to the main entrance. These exhibits were, predominantly, exhibits of non-White peoples and their cultural difference. The spatial organization of the exhibits during the World’s Columbian Exposition placed darker skinned groups of people at the bottom of the Midway and lighter skinned groups closer to the entrance of the White City, a physical organization of hierarchical, racialized space which reflected the White supremacist ideology informing the project. An examination of the Index To Midway Plaisance reveals not only an exclusion of people of color from the main White City but their showcase as decontextualized, exotic, and underdeveloped villages in supposed like-company with the “Hagenbeck Animal Show.” This hierarchical arrangement by race reveals the deep association of these urban forms and aesthetics with spatial processes of settler-state White supremacy and exclusion. According to this ideal, imaginary city non-White civilizations are exhibits to peruse and enjoy by White eyes, preferably outside the bounds of the city. White visitors could enjoy a Chinese tea house without any evidence of their inhabitation in the city, or enjoy an “Indian Village” without acknowledging the very present and ongoing land appropriation and genocide. The organization of these exhibits was an act of propaganda and erasure, building on the myths of Haussmannian urban renewal, enforcing the dichotomy between “East” and “West,” and enforcing the distinct racialization of space integral to the

settler-colonial state. The White City communicated the belief that the enjoyment of urban space was reserved for a wealthy White elite.

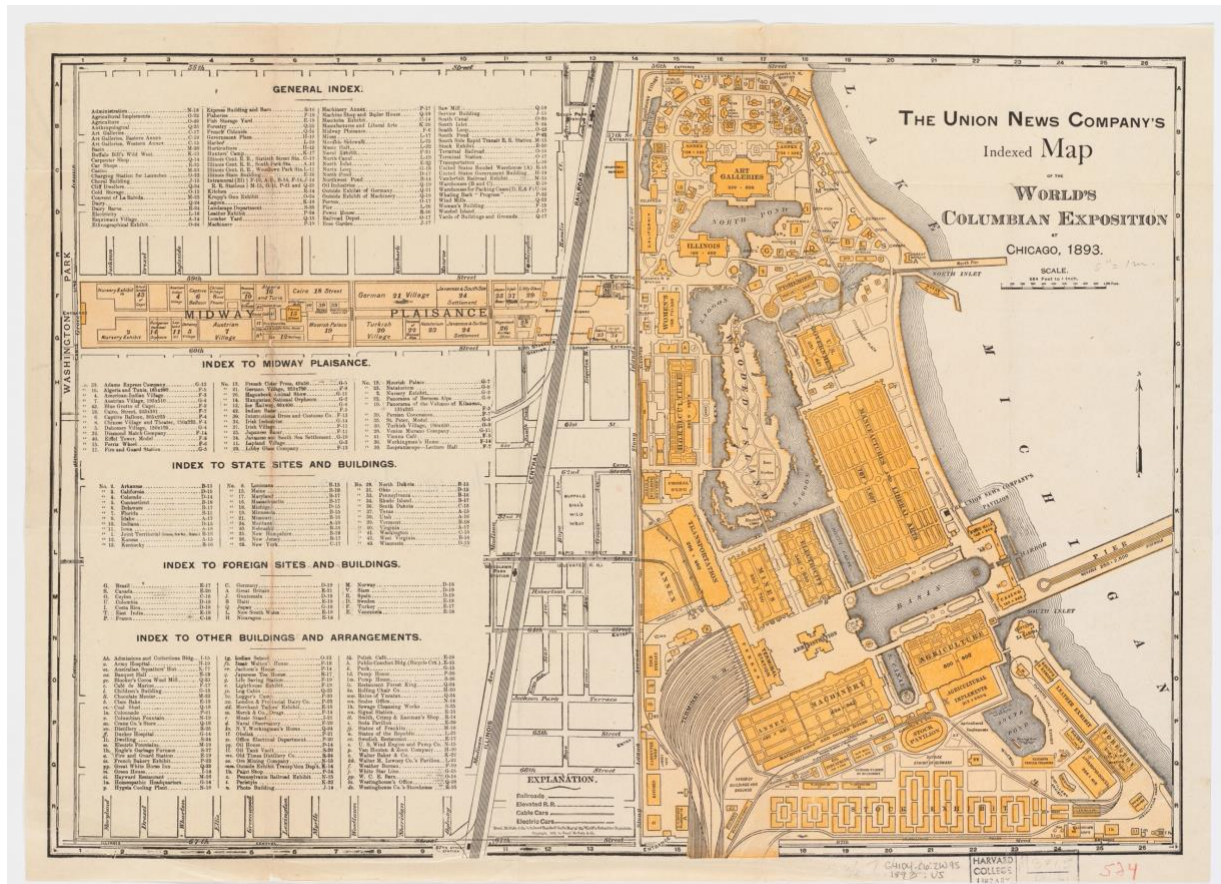


Figure 1. Indexed map of The World's Columbian Exposition. Reproduced from Union News Company (Boston, Mass.), creator, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

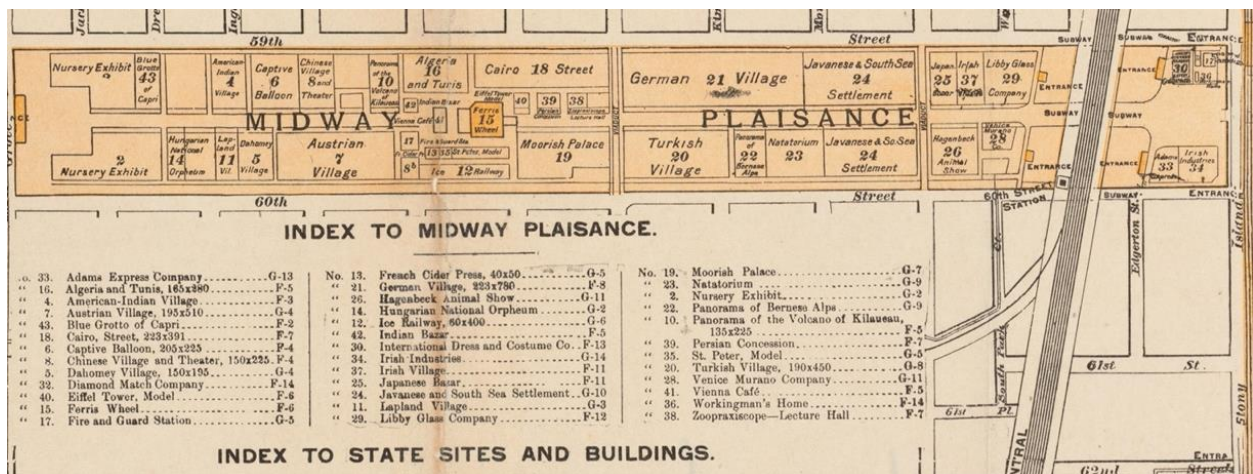


Figure 2. Closeup of the Midway Plaisance. The left side, furthest away from the entrance to the White City, features an “American Indian Village,” “Algeria and Tunisia” exhibit, “Chinese Village and Theater,” and “Moorish Palace” The right side,

close to the city, features a “German Village,” “Japanese Bazaar,” and an “Irish Village.” Adapted from *Union News Company (Boston, Mass.)*, creator, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

Triggered by the World's Columbian Fair in 1893, the City Beautiful Movement swept across the country, hoping to beautify and elevate American cities, undo the complications of unregulated urban expansion, and emulate the aesthetics of Beaux Arts classicism in Europe. This movement made place only for those acceptable in their mission towards civilization and beauty and reflected the racism of the fair it derived its inspiration from. This was an elitist, White movement for reimagining ideal urban spaces and ideal citizens. Proponents of this movement were many in the governing bodies and fiscal powers of San Francisco, leading to a power struggle between government officials and Chinatown residents over both the cultural landscape of the city and public perception of what is moral, civilized, and beautiful.

James Duval Phelan, former mayor of San Francisco (1897-1901) and president of the “Association for the Improvement and Adornment of San Francisco” invited Daniel Burnham to San Francisco to create a master plan for the city in 1904. Phelan extended this invitation in the hopes that San Francisco could be transformed into a city that embodied the aesthetics, civilization, commercial scale, and social control of Haussmann and the White City. As the Director of Works for the World’s Columbian Fair, Burnham embodied the ideals of City Beautiful and created master plans for cities across the country. Although much of this plan for San Francisco was never executed, there is value in an examination of urban ideals it represented. Burnham’s, “A report for the plan of San Francisco” is now a published work showing the inspiration, justification, and delineation of his ideas on the ideal urban makeup of San Francisco.

Burnham references what he deems to be the great cities of the “Old World” as inspirations for his plan: Paris, Berlin, Vienna, Moscow, and London. The “Old World” is a term

rooted in colonization and formulated in opposition to the “New World” which was a socially constructed idea of space which European colonizers imposed on the Western Hemisphere and the Americas. The term depicted the well settled and established Americas as savage, empty, wild, and rich with resources and land to be discovered, reaped and settled during Europe’s “Age of Exploration.” By contrast, the “Old World” refers to Europe, Asia, and Africa. However, as a Eurocentric term, the “great cities” of the “Old World” were exclusively European ones.

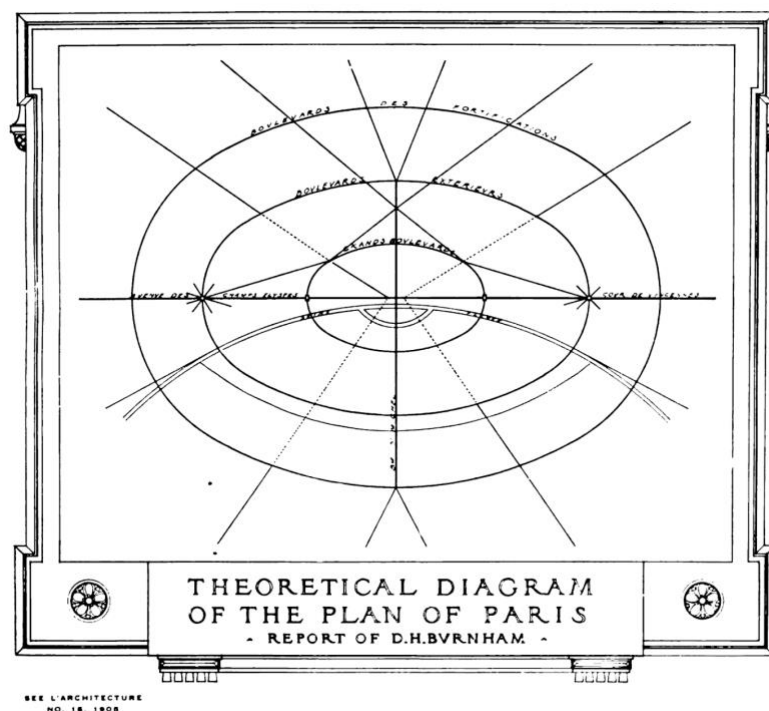


Figure 3. Theoretical Diagram of the Plan of Paris. This diagram distills Paris down to its simplest geometric forms to illustrate how it informs Burnham’s design of San Francisco. Reproduced from “A Report for the Plan of San Francisco” D. H. Burnham. 1905. p.37. Published by the city. Contributed by the Association for the Improvement and Adornment of San Francisco.

From these ideals he derived the form of “concentric rings separated by boulevards.” This is the most obvious reference Burnham makes to the urban renewal of Haussmann, as Paris’ grand boulevards and *percées* are shown as an abstracted basis for the design. The Civic Center of San Francisco was to be the center of these concentric rings, with radial arteries extending away from this point, towards the perimeter of the city. Much like Haussmann’s dissection of

Paris, one can see a similar pattern of large boulevards radiating away from important city fixtures providing them with extreme visibility and a monumental quality that is cut into the very fabric of the city. Burnham, taking from these models, mentions the intention of creating subcenters, each of which would feature a public “*Place*.” His treatment for the city was one that focused on parks and streets. His appropriation of *percées* and their consequent creative destruction placed Chinatown in the path of casualties on the path to modernity and urban reform.



Figure 4. Burnham's 1905 plan of San Francisco. City fabric is cut by grand boulevards towards public places. Reproduced from "Burnham Plan 1905." *FoundSF.org*. Licensed under [CC BY-NC-SA 3.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/) (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/>)

The creation of this plan arose from the presumption of Burnham, Phelan, and other City Beautiful proponents that they could plan for the city in a way that would save its citizens from dirt, disease, density and visible ugliness. However, much like Haussmann, their strategies for resolving these urban struggles revealed the dominant social sphere he was catering to - wealthy, White, San Franciscans. Robert Cherny shows the manner in which James Phelan's racist sentiments manifest in his vision of San Francisco: "Phelan's vision of a clean, beautiful, efficient city was also a city for whites only. He considered people of color as incapable of being assimilated, culturally or physically, and therefore saw them as a threat to the cultural values he sought to promote through beautification and his patronage of the arts."²⁶ Phelan's formulation of what was clean, beautiful, and civilized was deeply rooted in Whiteness. This could be inferred through his physical and cultural imaginings for the city, but even that analysis is not necessary to come to this conclusion. He spent his political career advocating for the U.S. as a "white man's country" and his 1920s senatorial campaign slogan was "Keep California White."²⁷ Burnham's designs and Phelan's vision for San Francisco was shared among many progressives, and this plan is notable in that it imagined a city in which Chinatown simply didn't exist.

His approach indicates not only the values he wished to elevate in cities, but also the fundamental way in which cities should be developed - from the top down, dictated by authority figures. The reference to Paris, particularly Paris under Haussmann and Napoleon III points to a

²⁶ Cherny, Robert W. (1994) *City Commercial, City Beautiful, City Practical: The San Francisco Visions of William C. Ralston, James D. Phelan, and Michael M. O'Shaughnessy*.

²⁷ Cherny. (1994) p. 304.

belief in authoritarian control. The banlieues are the outermost rings of the concentric circles of Paris. Today they are home to immigrants of color and low-income populations, many of whom came from former French colonies. Although Burnham did not address housing with any depth in his plan, he emulated this form of an elite/bourgeois center-city, which, applied under Phelan and other progressive city officials, would have expelled the working class, people of color, and other cultural outliers to the peripheries. These plans, much like the use of Haussmannian architecture in French colonies, emphasized the racialization of space. They aimed to show western civilization as superior: organized, well-spaced and culturally rich. Chinatown, on the other hand, was racialized as an underdeveloped invasion of the East. While I hesitate to equate Chinatown to the contrasted “Indigenous quarters” of the French colonies, Chinese residents *were* fitted along the same racial hierarchies. Within the context of the U.S., they were subject to the ongoing processes of White supremacist appropriation of space that occur within the settler-colonial environment. They were evaluated according to White-centered measures of health, productivity, beauty, and morality and consequently judged as undeserving of access to the city.

Legislative racism - Criminalization, Exploitation, and Exclusion

The organization of the physical terrain of Chinatown was a direct result of racism during this era. Spatial inequality and segregation was enforced and directly created by local, state, and federal legislation. Dyl describes the initial establishment of the Chinese population as settling into undesirable space: “By 1854 the city contained a distinct Chinese quarter concentrated on upper Sacramento Street and Dupont Street. In settling there, the Chinese were occupying land that had been abandoned in favor of more desirable real estate closer to the wharves; only later, with the growth of the city, did Chinatown become prime real estate.”²⁸ This statement is

²⁸ Dyl. (2017) p. 145

affirmed by Robert Cherny, who described the role of William Ralston, businessman, financier, and cofounder of the Bank of California in the urban development of the city:

When Ralston had arrived in San Francisco in 1854, the "instant city" created by the Gold Rush was centered around Portsmouth Square. By his investment decisions, Ralston changed the physical configuration of the city. In 1866, he announced that the Bank of California—the leading bank in the West—would relocate to a new building at the corner of California and Sansome streets. By this decision, he established the center of the financial district, pulling other financial and commercial firms toward his bank, and toward the South-of-Market area, where he had invested heavily.²⁹

While in the following years the Chinese were accused by the press of occupying and wasting the “best parts of town,” their location became central to business well after the establishment of the Chinese quarter, as a product of the investment decisions of White elites.³⁰

Chinese people not only feared attack and harassment outside of their neighborhood, but were required by real estate laws to live within the bounds of the Chinatown.³¹ Because of the 1790 Naturalization Law, Chinese immigrants were ineligible for citizenship. Legal restrictions on voting, the civil rights, and the ability to testify against White people placed them in a position of deep disenfranchisement.³² As Jim Crow-era legislation spread across the South after the Civil War, California was concerned about the rapid influx of Chinese immigrants. Between the 1860s and the 1940s, miscegenation laws, education segregation, employment legislation,

²⁹ Cherny. (1994) p. 229.

³⁰ *Suggestions for City Improvement - Why Chinatown has remained where it is.* (1902).

³¹ Salvatore, S. C., Garcia, M., Hornsby, A., Lawson, S., & Mah, T. (2004, revised 2009). *Civil Rights in America: Racial Desegregation of Public Accommodations*

³² *Civil Rights in America: Racial Desegregation of Public Accommodations*

and residential legislation which required Chinese to live in within one area of the city were all put into place.³³ These laws effectively cut the Chinese population off from life in San Francisco beyond their ethnic enclave. A National Historic Landmarks Theme Study describes how Chinese immigrants, in response to segregation, hostility and exclusion, created institutions outside of the broader city structure to provide for their communities: “As early as the 1850s, a Chinese quarter was already being established in San Francisco with shops, restaurants, boarding houses, and apothecaries to serve their own people. Mutual aid societies, known as the *huigun* system, or the Chinese Six Companies, developed to provide housing, jobs, recreational activities, and to mount lawsuits against the unequal treatment of the Chinese.”³⁴ These efforts led to the widespread belief that the Chinese had their own internal system of government separate from the state and was used as fodder in Anti-Chinese sentiment and rhetoric.

Anti-Chinese platforms became common across political lines during this time, but much of the legislation passed which aimed to exclude, criminalize and segregate the population was championed by progressive San Franciscans and the Workingmen’s Party. The Workingmen’s party briefly dominated the political landscape of San Francisco between 1870 and 1882 and pushed for union organizing around labor rights. “The Chinese Must Go!” was the cry of White immigrant labor in opposition to Chinese immigrant labor.³⁵ They were an anti-Chinese branch of the older, nationwide Workingman’s Party, which emerged with the fear-mongering cries of Yellow Peril from Denis Kearney. As Dyl states, “the Chinese remained convenient scapegoats for white workers suffering from a combination of real economic difficulties and a sense that

³³ *Civil Rights in America: Racial Desegregation of Public Accommodations*

³⁴ *Civil Rights in America: Racial Desegregation of Public Accommodations* p.112

³⁵ Olmsted, R. (1971). *The Chinese Must Go!*

they had lost status and opportunities that they perceived to be their birthright as white men.”³⁶ I emphasize Dyl’s claim that this sense of entitlement stemmed from their Whiteness, as many White workers were in fact immigrants who arrived within the same window of time as Chinese immigrants.

While European immigrants were not unconditionally protected from violence and discrimination, they were not racialized and excluded in the same manner as Chinese immigrants. Upon their arrival they were similarly resented for their labor competition and their Catholic and Roman Catholic religions. However, a, 1854 *New York Daily Tribune* publication sums up the fundamental difference between White and Chinese immigrants in the U.S.: “Any of the Christian races, however, are welcome there, or any of the white races. They all assimilate with Americans; they have sympathies together, and are gradually all fused together into one homogenous mass. But whether California should encourage an influx of a population like the Chinese admits of grave doubts.”³⁷ Despite the fact that Southern and Eastern European immigrants faced discrimination, as did Irish Catholic immigrants, they were seen as assimilable due to their Whiteness and their Christian religion. They were never restricted from naturalization, because they were close enough to the dominant idea of acceptable inhabitants of San Francisco to achieve the desired “homogenous mass.” The Chinese, on the other hand were fundamentally unassimilable. They were seen as heathens, and were barely afforded the title of human, much less the designation of deserving inhabitant of the city.

³⁶ Dyl. (2017) p. 146

³⁷ *New York Daily Tribune*, September 29, 1854, p. 4.

Unlike European immigrant labor, Chinese immigrant labor was portrayed as contrary to the values of the abolition of slavery by government officials in support of Chinese exclusion.³⁸ The popular term “coolie” meant indentured laborer, but took on distinct racial implications as a large majority of Chinese laborers signed contracts with companies such as the Central Pacific Railroad Company. This was a feat of contradictory social myth which allowed White workers to undercut the right of Chinese laborers to live and work in cities as something morally regressive and against the Chinese laborers’ own rights. Yan Phou Lee’s 1889 publication, *The Chinese Must Stay* was a direct response to the Workingmen’s slogan, “The Chinese Must Go!”³⁹ The publication featured systematic refutation of the numerous justifications for the legal exclusion of Chinese immigrants, including those relating to “coolie” labor. He stated “if, on the one hand, they not princes and nobles, on the other hand, they are not coolies and slaves. They all came voluntarily, as their consular papers certified, and their purpose in leaving their home and friends to get honest work. They were told that they could obtain higher wages in America than elsewhere, and that Americans were friendly to the Chinese and invited them to come.”⁴⁰ On anxieties about cheap Chinese labor depressing wages his response was scathing: “You may as well run down machinery as to sneer at Chinese cheap labor. Machines live on nothing at all; they have displaced millions of laborers; why not do away with machines?”⁴¹ The scarcity of living wages and employment was not the fault of Chinese laborers, but the fault of White owners and businesses exploiting their willingness to work for less in order to survive or to send money home to their families. This critique aptly pointed to the misapplied, racist blame of these

³⁸ Jung, Moon-Ho. (2005) *Outlawing ‘Coolies’: Race, Nation, and Empire in the Age of Emancipation*.

³⁹ Lee, Y. (1889). *The Chinese Must Stay*.

⁴⁰ Lee, Y. (1889). p. 479

⁴¹ Lee, Y. (1889). p. 479

progressive, labor rights-oriented parties pushing for legislation which would exclude or deport Chinese residents.

Despite this, limitations on Chinese immigration and labor were passed under this pretense of restricting such forced labor. For example, the Page Act of 1875 prohibited the immigration of coerced or immoral labor. Section 5 of this Act specifically prohibited the importation of women “for the purposes of prostitution”. This law was an effort to restrict Asian labor without the explicit, categorical exclusion of Chinese immigrants. It effectively restricted Chinese women from immigration on the grounds that any Chinese woman could engage in prostitution. The basis for this law is well represented by the words of Horace Greeley in 1854. Abolitionist and publisher of New York Tribune, Greeley stated that “the Chinese are uncivilized, unclean, and filthy beyond all conception without any of the higher domestic or social relations; lustful and sensual in their dispositions; *every* female is a prostitute of the basest order; the first words of English they learn are terms of obscenity or profanity, and beyond this they care to learn no more.”⁴² Along with further references to their pagan religion, Greeley evokes imagery of hordes of Chinese immigrants flooding into California renewing the “horrors of the African slave-trade.” This act marked the end of open borders after the Burlingame Seward treaty, and served to prevent the immigration of families. This legislation further skewed Chinese populations in the U.S. by gender and was just one of many examples of the racialized sexualization of Asian women that permeated media and popular perception.

The Chinese population soon after became subject to America’s first legal restriction on immigrants of a certain ethnic group.⁴³ The Chinese Exclusion Act was signed into law in 1882

⁴² *New York Daily Tribune*. (1854) p. 4.

⁴³ Chinese Exclusion Act (1882).

as a 10-year moratorium on Chinese labor immigration. This act made it extremely difficult for even non-laborers to immigrate into the country. Furthermore, as Chinese immigrants were restricted from naturalization, Chinese Exclusion effectively immobilized the Chinese population in America and subjected them to consistent attempts at deportation. The following account shows the ways in which the flexible definition of “laborer” allowed for the discriminant deportation of Chinese immigrants:

A Chinese by the name of Wah Sang was admitted to this country as a student in theology, and as long as he was a student he was allowed to remain in the country; but when he completed his course in theological training, and entered into active service in preaching the Gospel to his countrymen under the auspices of the Methodist Church, he was arrested in Texas as a laborer, was tried and ordered deported in February, 1905, the court sustaining the contention of the immigration officials that a preacher is a laborer, and therefore subject to the operation of the Exclusion Law.⁴⁴

Although admitted as a student, the ability of the government to decide what constituted a “laborer” ensured that Wah Sang could only remain in the U.S. at the discretion of the government. States manufactured insecurity and criminalized Chinese immigrants who simply hoped to inhabit and work in U.S. cities.

The Chinese Exclusion Act, which expired in 1892, was extended another ten years with the Geary Act, legislation that added the requirement that Chinese immigrants acquire certificates of residents within the year or face deportation. In response to arguments that every American was required to register, one community member, Jee Gam, spoke to the unequal stakes, in which most Americans stood only to lose their vote for the following year if they failed to register: “So one registration is voluntary, while the other is compelled. In other words, the

⁴⁴ Chew, N. (2006). The Treatment of the Exempt Classes of Chinese in the U.S. (1908). In Yung J., Chang G., & Lai H. (Eds.), *Chinese American Voices: From the Gold Rush to the Present*

former law makes a person a free man, the other law makes one a slave, a criminal, or even a dog. For the only class that are required to give photographs are the criminals, and the only animal that must wear a tag is a dog. The Chinese decline to be counted in with either of these classes, so they refuse to register, and I do not blame them;”⁴⁵ Jee Gam shows the vivid offense that did not go unnoticed by the Chinese population in America. The Chinese were ordered on a hierarchy away from the status of valid, deserving inhabitant of the city and towards the status of criminal or animal. Despite protest and refusals to register, the Geary act was deemed constitutional by the U.S. Supreme Court, the only concession coming with an amendment from Congress to extend the registration period an additional six months.⁴⁶

The American Federation of Labor published a pamphlet in 1902: *Some Reasons for Chinese Exclusion, Meat Vs. Rice, American Manhood Against Asiatic Coolieism. Which Shall Survive?*⁴⁷ This pamphlet was rife with the rhetoric of Yellow Peril, pushing for the extension of Chinese Exclusion as necessary to combat the existential threat of Chinese immigration: “The Caucasian will not tolerate the Mongolian. As ultimately all government is based on physical force, the white population of this country would not, without resistance suffer itself to be destroyed.”⁴⁸ This pamphlet also played into the countless Western stereotypes of Chinese people such as the emasculation of men, their supposed inhuman ability to swarm, spread, and live on nothing, their domination of employment to the point of depriving White men, women, and children of opportunities, their unsanitary social habits, low moral standards, drug habits,

⁴⁵ Gam, J. (2006). The Geary Act: From the Standpoint of a Christian Chinese (1892). In Yung J., Chang G., & Lai H. (Eds.), *Chinese American Voices: From the Gold Rush to the Present*

⁴⁶ *Fong Yue Ting vs United States*, 149 U.S. 698 (1893); Geary Act (27 Stat. 25), sec. 7, and McCreary Amendment (28 Stat. 7), sec. 2

⁴⁷ American Federation of Labor. (1902). *Some reasons for Chinese exclusion: meat vs. rice, American manhood against Asiatic coolieism. Which shall survive?*

⁴⁸ American Federation of Labor. (1902).

resistance to assimilation, and of course, supposedly rampant forced prostitution and labor. On the subject of Chinese threat to White labor, the pamphlet said this:

If we were to return to the antebellum ideas of the South, now happily discarded, the Chinese would satisfy every requirement of a slave or servile class. They work well, they are docile, and they would not be concerned about their political condition; but such suggestions are repulsive to American civilization. America has dignified work and made it honorable...The political power invested in men by this Government shows the absolute necessity of keeping up the standard of population and not permitting it to deteriorate by contact with inferior and non-assimilative races.⁴⁹

Yet again, we see abolitionism weaponized to the detriment of the Chinese population. The pamphlet also entertains long passages of White supremacist saviorism of Chinese women from misogynistic, sexually deviant Chinese men, citing the disproportionately low numbers of Chinese women and children “living as families” compared to those living with “apparently indiscriminate parental relations” or those who were designated “professional prostitutes and children living together.”⁵⁰ Stories of sex trafficking share pages with passages expressing revulsion at the number of children it resulted in. The continued insistence of White San Franciscans that all Chinese workers and women were tantamount to slaves almost seems to imply that they thought Chinese workers were unable to consent to labor, and Chinese women were unable to consent to immigration or any form of familial or community structure. This further dehumanized them, revoked their agency, and placed them further from voluntary inhabitant of the city and closer to a pitiful animal which needed to be saved by a moral, benevolent Western society.

Chinese exclusion was made permanent in the same year as the pamphlet’s publication in 1902, just a few years before the 1906 earthquake. The Chinese Exclusion Act was not repealed

⁴⁹ American Federation of Labor (1902). p. 29.

⁵⁰ American Federation of Labor (1902). p. 23.

until the signing of the Magnuson Act on December 17 of 1943, over half a century after its genesis. This legislation was a manifestation of fear that Chinese immigrants would be a competitive threat to the working class and demonstrated a strong culture of racism and suspicion towards Chinese immigrants, who were forced to find community and safety in San Francisco's Chinatown. It provided the legal justification for harassment, as even exempt, non-laboring classes were deported, harassed, or denied basic rights of movement on the whims of immigration officers. As stated by the U.S. Office of the Historian: "Some advocates of anti-Chinese legislation [...] argued that admitting Chinese into the United States lowered the cultural and moral standards of American society."⁵¹ The construction of the perception of Chinese immigrants as an inherently corrupting and inferior presence became a strong strategy by progressives and government officials alike for exclusion on both the city and countrywide scale.

Who has the right to urban life? - racial scapegoating and negative perception building of "deserving" and "undeserving" city dwellers

⁵¹ U.S. Department of State. *Chinese Immigration and the Chinese Exclusion Acts*.



Figure 5 – The Great Fear of the Period that Uncle Sam may be Swallowed by Foreigners: The Problem Solved. Reproduced from the Library of Congress. Published in San Francisco: White & Bauer, [between 1860 and 1869]. No known restrictions on publication. <https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/98502829/>

Dominant social processes which legitimized or delegitimized identities in San Francisco, California, or the entire United States were extremely successful at segregating and disenfranchising the Chinese population. In doing this, White San Franciscans crafted a dominant conception of deserving inhabitants of San Francisco which inherently rejected the Chinese identity. This is evident in the widespread language of the Chinese as an occupying, flooding, or invading force, and the very nature of racial anxieties of the “Yellow Peril”. While the neighborhood was formed in an undesirable location at the time of its establishment, the rise of the financial district as the city’s business center, directly bordering the historic Chinatown, created a sense of injustice in the eyes of business minded White San Franciscans who dreamed of broad commercial avenues in the place of Chinatown’s dense alleyways.

By examining an attempted forced eviction of Chinatown, I hope to show the direct association between the construction of an imagined Chinese “other” and the exclusion of Chinatown residents from urban space and public services. These strategies expose a deep climate of racism in legislation and the imaginations of White San Franciscans, and the racialization of space reflects this. Just as the physical makeup of Chinatown was dictated by official laws, heavy stereotyping and criminalization created the social conditions necessary to morally mandate the universal condemnation of the neighborhood. It was seen as being a crowded slum, diseased, and filled with opium dens, gambling and prostitution. Because of restrictions on immigration, especially against families, the population of Chinatown was deeply skewed towards working men. The social, political, and economic conditions restricted them from access to urban life and resources. The spaces within Chinatown formed as a product of these conditions, but the resulting density and social ills paired with cultural differences were seen by the White public as a strange, inferior way of life. Yan Phou Lee, in response to accusations of filthy dwellings, poor food, overcrowding, and disregard for health and fire ordinances, breaks down the heavy, discriminatory fines and taxes which prevented many Chinese from improving their living conditions:

The Chinaman does not object to dainty food and luxurious lodgings. But the paternal government of California taxed him as soon as he came ashore ; permitted its agents to blackmail him at intervals ; made him pay \$15 a month for carrying his customers' washing in his hand ; levied a progressive poll-tax, without providing a school for him ; a road-tax before he began to travel, and, when he went to the mines, collected a water-rent of thirty cents a day, and a progressive license-tax from \$4 to \$20 per month. Even if he earned five dollars a day, he could not have fifteen cents left to live on.⁵²

⁵² Lee, Y. (1889) p. 481.

To sum up his argument, the heavy burdens of unavoidable racist taxes paired with exclusion from civil rights and resources manufactured this urban density. The Chinese could appreciate luxury, but were specifically excluded from the financial freedom and stability needed to achieve sanitary, spacious, and overall healthy dwellings. Despite the reasoning behind the reality of their living conditions, White San Franciscans attributed every symptom of poverty and degradation with individual choices, moral deviance, and fascinating cultural inferiority.

Many White San Franciscans as well as other tourists believed that the residents of Chinatown lived in a labyrinth-like system of tunnels, said to be up to 8 stories underground, filled with opium dens and intrigue. This actually consisted of a series of connected basements and cellars one story below street level.⁵³ Although this reputation was used to oppress or call for the displacement of Chinese residents, White entrepreneurs attempted to make a profit by marketing these scenes of depravity to “adventurous” and “thrill-seeking” White San Franciscans: “Thus, Arnold Genthe, who frequented Chinatown in the mid-1890s, recalled befriending a Chinese opium addict ‘whose only source of income was the few nickels given him by the guides who brought tourists to his shack to see a smoker in action.’”⁵⁴ Raymond W. Rast illustrates the morbid fascination of White San Franciscans with an “authentic” Chinatown and its residents in *The Cultural Politics of Tourism in San Francisco’s Chinatown, 1882–1917*:

Despite wider misgivings, some of San Francisco’s white entrepreneurs accommodated and cultivated touristic interest in authentic Chinatown during the 1890s and early 1900s. Tour guides and other promoters identified elements of depravity and danger—which to them represented authentic Chinatown—and put them on display. When social reform efforts reduced the supply of such scenes, some tour guides began to stage them.⁵⁵

⁵³ Rast, R. W. (2007). *The Cultural Politics of Tourism in San Francisco's Chinatown, 1882-1917*.

⁵⁴ Rast, R. W. (2007) p. 45

⁵⁵ Rast, R. W. (2007) p. 32

Unaware or deliberately blind to circumstances that created such an unhealthy environment, the unsightly density, poverty, and disease was further used against Chinese residents as judgement of their character, moral worth, cleanliness and habits. This judgement served as justification for wishes to remove them from the city altogether.

An example of this can be found as early as March of 1880. A sixteen-page pamphlet was distributed by the Workingmen's Committee of California, tellingly titled "Chinatown Declared a Nuisance!" in which the neighborhood was condemned as a menace to public health.⁵⁶ This pamphlet detailed the findings of an inspection of the city, calling the state of Chinatown a "disgrace to the civilization of the age." Dyl examines this phenomenon of associating the Chinese population with filth: "As the geographer Susan Craddock has observed, dirt was a "class-coded concept" at the turn of the century, and it was often racially coded as well." Most notable were the accusations under the headers of "Filth, Cruelty and Crime," "Chinese Courtesans" and "Dreadful Diseases." In the first of these, they cited the lack of space and sanitation. They claimed that the sick of Chinatown were "simply left without sympathy, care, or even notice to suffer and die."⁵⁷ It should be noted here that healthcare was among the public services that Chinatown residents were restricted from in wider San Francisco. In the second of these, they commented on Chinese prostitutes as being a shamelessly corrupting influence, luring in young boys as young as 10 and spreading venereal diseases. On the subject, a Dr. Toland was quoted saying "I am satisfied that nearly all the boys in town, who have venereal diseases, contracted them in Chinatown. [...] The women do not care how old the boys are, whether five years old or more, so long as they have money."⁵⁸ They describe the White prostitutes in

⁵⁶ Chinatown declared a nuisance! (1880)

⁵⁷ Chinatown declared a nuisance! (1880) p. 4

⁵⁸ Chinatown declared a nuisance! (1880) p. 5

Chinatown as even more wretched and pitiful, implying that they were abandoned or preyed on in the neighborhood and pulled into this lifestyle. While these Chinese women are displayed as hypersexual, predatory and diseased, White women are portrayed as blameless victims. “It is my opinion that the maintenance of this population, instead of advancing civilization, is a crime against it” Dr. Toland continues on to say. In this pamphlet, Chinatown is called a “laboratory of infection” which “contaminates the atmosphere of the streets and houses of a populous, wealthy, and intelligent community.” This reduction to an inhuman breeding ground of contagion is translated clearly into spatial terms by the language of this pamphlet. The very existence of Chinatown near wealthy residential and business sectors of San Francisco is framed as both a legal and moral crime.⁵⁹

Justified by this inspection, the condemnation of Chinatown came with the unsuccessful order that residents were to vacate within 30 days after the pamphlets publication, after which the neighborhood would be destroyed. Despite claiming that Chinatown residents were living as cleanly and decently as anyone could in their conditions, despite claiming responsibility for those conditions, *and* despite claims that they were not motivated by race, prejudice or class hatred, the pamphlet concludes by claiming that “the Chinese cancer must be cut out of the heart of our city, root and branch, if we have any regard for its future sanitary welfare.”⁶⁰ The weaponization of their perception as sexually depraved, diseased, and fundamentally other from normal, respectable San Francisco citizens is employed here as a strategy to portray their very existence in the space as irreconcilable with the standards of the wider city. Through this graphic

⁵⁹ Another section of the pamphlet details every city ordinance in violation by Chinatown. One example of this is the Cubic Air Law, a racist city ordinance which required that all lodgings contain 500 cubic feet for each person in residence. Violation of this law was punishable by fines between \$10 and \$500 and/or by 5 days to 3 months in prison. Between 1873 and 1886 thousands of Chinese were jailed in San Francisco under this law. Yang, J. (2009). The Anti-Chinese Cubic Air Ordinance.

⁶⁰ Chinatown declared a nuisance! (1880) p. 6

description of an inspection of Chinatown, the Workingmen's Committee of California dehumanizes the population and strips them of the validity of their inhabitation, all the while shirking any appearance of being motivated by race or class hatred by emphasizing the threat to public health.

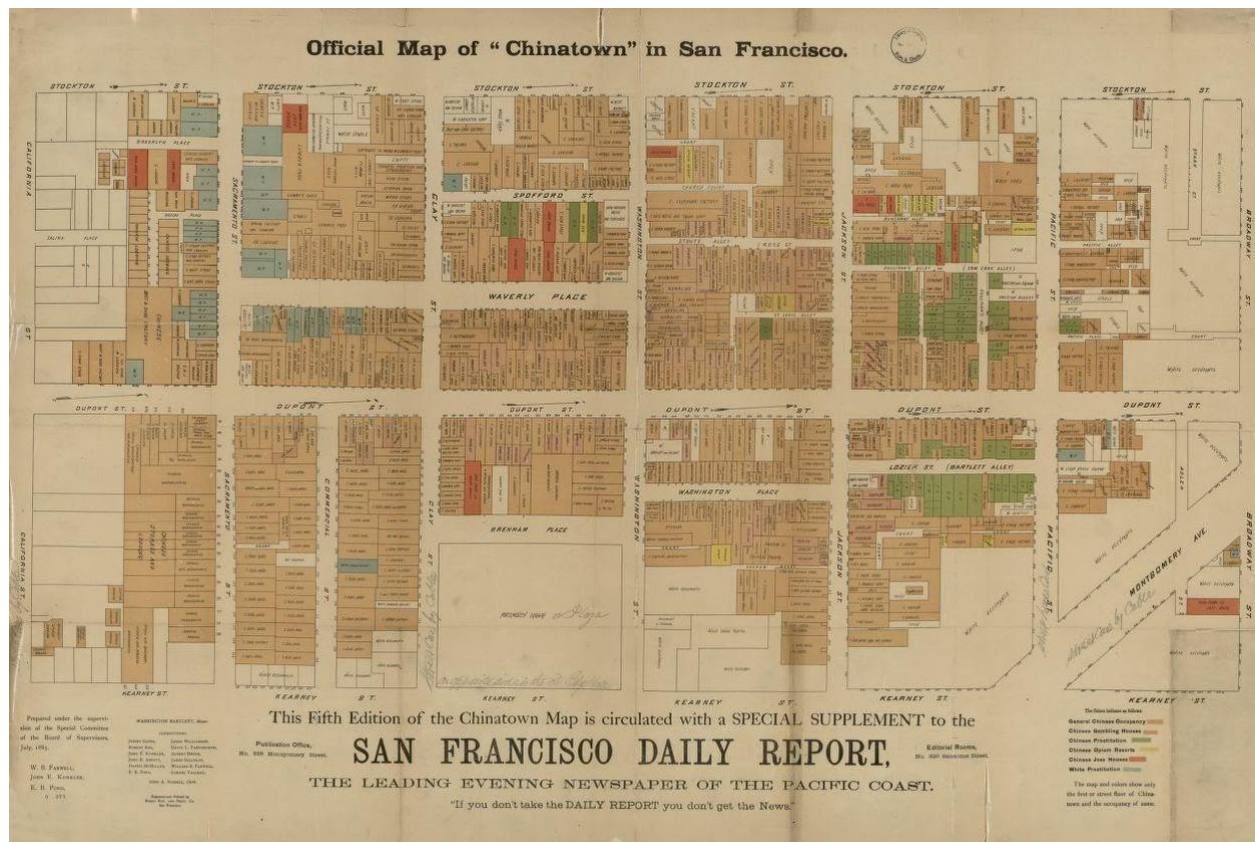


Figure 6. Official map of "Chinatown" in San Francisco. San Francisco: Engraved & printed by Bosqui Eng. & Print Co. Farwell, W. B., Kunkler, J. E., Pond, E. B. & Bosqui Eng. & Print. Co. (1885) Reproduced from the Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/i>

This approach to the condemnation of Chinatown was revived and modified several times over next decade or so. In 1885, Willard Farwell, committee chair of the board of supervisors, thoroughly tracked and mapped vice and crime in the neighborhood. They created a color coded map tracking first floor functions of businesses, temples, factories and lodging houses as well as the color coded locations of opium dens, gambling halls and brothels: "Guided by this new spatial knowledge, police and city prosecutors initiated a campaign of repression against the quarter's Chinese residents. City officials targeted both the operators of vice resorts and those

who constituted lesser threats, such as laundrymen who operated their businesses at night in defiance of a city ordinance.”⁶¹ Further armed by spatial knowledge of the neighborhood, city officials even more effectively harassed residents and condemned Chinatown yet again.

In 1902, an article was published in the *San Francisco Newsletter* expressing thoughts on the continued habitation of Chinese in the middle of the city.⁶² It mused on the 1880 attempt at eviction as result of demagogic politicians, and modified their stance to this: “It was not the uncleanliness of Chinatown that they were concerned about, but the capacity of the little brown men to work hard, keep sober, live economically, and render their employers a maximum of service for a minimum of wages.” This news publication reflects the dual forces of exploitation and exclusion. As with the employment Chinese in building of the transcontinental and the use of their neighborhood for entrepreneurial touristic success, the Chinese population was valued only insofar as they produced profits for the dominant sphere of society, be they capitalist business owners or government officials. In terms of innate value, they were stripped of the status of “deserving” to thrive in and access urban space through constant juxtaposition against White ideas of health, morality and productivity. Under the spatially appropriative process of White supremacy, Chinatown residents were deemed filthy, diseased, and sexually depraved. To those pushing for labor rights, Chinatown residents are likened to slaves who never tire. To capitalists, they are unable to live a productive lifestyle and generate value for the city. The publication’s claim that “Chinatown has got to be reclaimed and made a business section of the city...” echoes the 1880 pamphlet’s assertion that Chinatown must be removed for “future sanitary welfare.”

⁶¹ Rast, R. W. (2007) p. 36

⁶² Why Chinatown has Remained Where it is. *San Francisco Newsletter*. August 30, 1902.

Chinatown residents stood in the way of the dominant imagination of San Francisco and were stripped of almost all access to the city in the process of various groups enacting this imagination. The same *San Francisco Newsletter* publication concludes, “We need the Chinese, but we do not need Chinatown in [its] present condition or location. The Chinese now have one of the best parts of town, and they have forfeited their right to it by their habits of life.”⁶³ Unintentionally, this publication echoes the vocabulary of the Right to the City, stating quite clearly that White San Franciscans needed the Chinese to exploit them for their commercial wares, cultural authenticity and labor, but that they do not need or desire their physical presence in the city. This contrast between deserving and undeserving inhabitants within a society was a powerful tool for the construction of spatial inequality by framing the violence of dispossession, exploitation and exclusion as a choice for the common good.

⁶³ Why Chinatown has Remained Where it is. (1902)

Part 2: After the Earthquake - Strategies of Displacement and Resistance in Contested Chinatown Space

Natural disaster is often claimed to be a great equalizer; something that affects rich and poor alike; the stage for great acts of solidarity. However, according to Steve Kroll-Smith, this is a temporary or surface level phenomenon.⁶⁴ This chapter focuses on the destruction and rebuilding of San Francisco during and after the earthquake of 1906. This moment in time can reveal how the practice of creating value systems for types of citizens is directly tied to the elevation of market viability as the determining factor of urban and societal worthiness. The creation of deserving and undeserving inhabitants such as those described in the last chapter- White, pure, productive, moral, versus foreign, diseased, and morally deviant - resulted in the creation of associated space that served above all a wealthy White elite. This designation completely disenfranchised marginalized populations and forced them to play into the values of White American society, otherwise be discarded and displaced. When the earthquake and fires razed down much of the city, the disordered landscape triggered even more aggressive contention over the physical space of Chinatown and the right of Chinese residents to urban life. Yet, as Kroll-Smith states, “for all the mayhem they create, disasters are not transformative.” Although the narrative of equality in the face of chaos is compelling to some, in reality this natural disaster represented the opportunity for a restructured city and society that was seized not by a marginalized working class but by a momentarily disrupted ruling class. Geographical bounds of power were redrawn in the interest of the dominant class and property and land ownership of elite classes was reinforced. In line with Lefebvre’s theoretical

⁶⁴ Kroll-Smith, 2018

understanding of urban space under capitalism, decision-makers attempted to relegate a “proletariat,” or working-class minority, to the outskirts of the city.

The following sections explore the specific strategies of reinstating spatial inequality. Beginning with the universal realities and consequences of the 1906 earthquake, we will then discuss criminalization and exclusion of Chinese refugees around this constructed, inferior and dangerous identity. Through the selective protection of private property, police enforcement of the physical space refugees could occupy, and the dispensation of aid with the ultimate goals of restoring populations to their “accustomed status” rather than according to need, built urban space was yet again deliberately segregated by race and class, and social hierarchies were thus restored. Through the exploration of the physical neighborhood of Chinatown as it was rebuilt, I will examine the neighborhood terrain on which the right to the city was disputed through attempts at displacement and resistance. Despite collectivist support and resilience within their own community, the methods of resistance employed by Chinatown residents that were ultimately the most successful played into a system of tokenization of self and commodification of space by necessity to combat the darker sides of their perception and “earn” the right to the space they inhabited. Much like the White City Midway Plaisance from the World’s Columbian Fair, they were able to claim their limited space only by exotifying themselves into a spectacle for the enjoyment of and consumption by White San Franciscans.

The Chinese Dispelled from the Heart of the City

In 1906, the largest earthquake to hit Northern California on record devastated San Francisco. With a magnitude of 7.9 and an epicenter estimated to be offshore just two miles west of the city, the tremors destroyed city infrastructure and ruptured gas mains. The resulting fires

burned five square miles of the city, killed over 3,000 Bay Area residents, and left 225,000 people homeless refugees. In San Francisco, 80% of the urban fabric was destroyed. Compounding these events was the baseline condition of Chinese people living in San Francisco. City Beautiful proponents in places of governmental or financial power explicitly hoped to displace the whole of Chinatown. Government officials made continuous policy choices which devalued Chinese lives. They were unable to claim the benefits of citizenship. They were physically segregated in a degraded, dense, neighborhood. Lastly, a deep perception of the Chinese as heathen, dangerous, depraved, eternally foreign, made many White San Franciscans see them as a threat to White people and property. Because of aforementioned social conditions the Chinese were particularly vulnerable to a large-scale natural disaster.

When San Francisco was in the middle of chaos and tragedy, Chinatown was the last to be protected.⁶⁵ Because the earthquake had shattered the water mains as well as the gas mains, there was not sufficient water to fight the fires. At the direction of the Mayor Schmitz, rich neighborhoods like Nob Hill received water, while Chinatown firefighting efforts consisted of using black powder to prevent the spread of the flames. This deliberate destruction of buildings was an attempt to create dead zones that would inhibit the spread of the fire, but due to negligence by the San Francisco Fire Department, the unwise use of black powder instead of dynamite failed to accomplish this goal of limiting fuel for the fires and ultimately led to more of the city burning.⁶⁶ Neighborhoods that were composed of less sturdy buildings - low income neighborhoods - fared worse. Chinatown was thoroughly destroyed. The immediate disaster response actively prioritized White San Franciscan elites over the residents of Chinatown.

⁶⁵ Kroll-Smith, J. S. (2018). *Recovering Inequality: Hurricane Katrina, the San Francisco Earthquake of 1906, and the Aftermath of Disaster*

⁶⁶ Kroll-Smith, J. S. (2018).

Disaster response and relief efforts disregarded the Chinese population when the earthquake and following fires left the residents of Chinatown homeless refugees. The destruction of the city by natural disaster caused violence and fear in and of itself, but the dismantling of previous racialized and hierarchical space by natural disaster created unavoidable confrontation between separated classes of San Francisco residents. No longer did rich and poor, White and non-White travel in constructed segregated spheres. Large groups of people were scrambling with large chests for their belongings, flooding to open spaces throughout the city, setting up camps, all chaotically mixed. While Chinatown residents were a “nuisance” contained to their own neighborhood, they were treated and perceived as an infestation once they traveled beyond those boundaries into the wider city and Bay Area. Chinese refugees were corralled by army relief efforts into one camp and then moved around several times due to concerns from White property owners who did not want them near their homes.⁶⁷ Many Chinese refugees broke from official relief efforts, choosing instead to seek refuge in Oakland, Potrero Hill, Richmond, and Marin County.⁶⁸

Creating safe spaces for Chinese refugees was simply not a priority and the residents of the destroyed Chinatown were viewed as a threat above all else. This deprioritization is evident in the media response to those of the Chinese refugees who found shelter in Oakland. *The Oakland Herald* published on April 27 of 1906:

One of the evils springing from the late disaster to San Francisco, one that menaces Oakland exceedingly, but that seems to have escaped attention, is the great influx of Chinese into this city from San Francisco. Not only have they pushed outward the limits of Oakland's heretofore constricted and insignificant Chinatown, but they have settled themselves in large

⁶⁷ Dyl, J. (2017) p. 99.

⁶⁸ Dyl, J. (2017) p. 100.

colonies throughout the residence parts of the city, bringing with them their vices and their filth.⁶⁹

The language here is clearly one of infestation and colonization. The language of Yellow Peril and the perceived existential threat reappeared as refugees spilled into the Chinese neighboring cities. Chinese refugees are described as taking over and degrading Oakland, when in fact they were responding to disaster and displacement like everyone else. The fact that they were so carefully relegated to their contained ethnic enclave, allowing White San Franciscans to acknowledge the existence of Chinese immigrants exclusively on their own terms, created discord when these spatial boundaries were destroyed. The confrontation with previously avoided populations exposed preformed fears and prejudices and Eurocentrism in White San Franciscans that manifested in violence towards Chinese people, neglect on relief fronts, and efforts to expel them far away upon rebuilding.

Accumulation by Dispossession - The Violent Reinstatement of the Status Quo on an Urban Blank Slate

In the midst and aftermath of disaster, how are disordered spatial and social boundaries reformed? Kroll-Smith aptly describes the idea of “fashioning the looter” as the criminalization of certain groups of refugees according to race and class. In the case of San Francisco, the criminalization of the lower class and racial minorities directly reflected a society that protected wealth, private property, Whiteness, and status. A militarized police response protected White wealthy elites and their property not only from the threats of the earthquake and subsequent fires, but from their non-White, non-wealthy, and non-respectable counterparts. Mayor Eugene Schmitz issued several announcements that “looters will be shot,” stating that police would not

⁶⁹ Chinese Crowding into Fashionable Districts. (1906, April 27). *The Oakland Herald*

waste their time on thieves.⁷⁰ Many who did not have a “respectable” look to them were shot by police for picking their own belongings up from the ground or for having their pockets full, with no regard for whether these possessions belonged to the person or not. This militarization of the landscape and the reckless aggression of the police began the first work of reinstating the hierarchical geographic and social order of the city: Kroll-Smith states that “Schmitz would later order troops to guard the city’s wealthiest neighborhoods, areas like Nob Hill and Van Ness, from those who lived south of Market and the Barbary Coast, poor and working-class neighborhoods.”⁷¹ By guarding wealthy neighborhoods and property against poor or non-White refugees, police presence in the city resegregated the population and made many urban spaces inaccessible to the working class and racial minorities yet again.

The general public glorified these shootings under the guise of broader social order. Protection of private property justified the discriminant shooting of San Francisco residents along race and class lines. White San Franciscans lauded the efforts of troops for their violence towards civilians amid continuing fires: “In spite of the vigilance of the police and the United States troops, who are patrolling the burned and burning section, thieves and vandals worked. The shooting of three fiends caught in the act of robbing the dead had a tendency to check pillage and theft, but failed to stop it.”⁷² The violent protection of upper-class property against lower class citizens and the active police presence only served to compound the insecurities faced by poor refugees of color. Accounts of looting were inaccurate caricatures; stories of “Asian-like ghouls” biting off the earlobes and fingers of dead bodies for jewelry reveal the less than human

⁷⁰ Kroll-Smith, J. S. (2018).

⁷¹ Kroll-Smith, J. S. (2018). p. 68

⁷² Wilson, J. R. (2016). *San Francisco’s Horror of Earthquake and Fire: Terrible devastation and heart-rending scenes, ... immense loss of life and hundreds of millions of property destroyed.* p. 47

imagination of the Chinese people in the city by more privileged populations.⁷³ White San Franciscans excluded Chinese refugees from the interclass solidarity of city inhabitants responding to disaster. Instead, the construction of Chinese identities as an existential threat over the course of the previous decades drove White San Franciscans to a racist fear of the displaced Chinese.

Joining the police enforcement of private property and looting, citizens also partook in the reinforcement of order. The following account from civilian Oliver Posey, Jr. does not specify who was the victim of this hanging, however it does reveal that civilians felt empowered to enact their own perception of justice in the protection of property:

Were it not for the fact that the soldiers in charge of the city do not hesitate in shooting down the ghouls the lawless element would predominate. Not alone do the soldiers execute the law. On Wednesday afternoon, in front of the Palace Hotel, a crowd of workers in the ruins discovered a miscreant in the act of robbing a corpse of its jewels. Without delay he was seized, a rope was obtained and he was strung up to a beam which was left standing in the ruined entrance of the Palace Hotel.⁷⁴

The language of “ghoul” and “miscreant” in Posey’s account eerily echoes the monstrous reimagining of Chinese refugees in the city and could be read as code for someone who was probably poor, desperate, or non-White.

This assumption that anyone penalized for thievery was probably working class or non-White is further supported by the fact that upper-class White San Franciscan’s participated in a form of “elite looting” which spurred no significant response from the general public or law enforcement.⁷⁵ Kroll-Smith compares the racialized perception of “looters” versus “survivors” in

⁷³ Kroll-Smith, J. S. (2018). p. 61

⁷⁴ Wilson, J. R. (2016). p. 166

⁷⁵ Kroll-Smith, J. S. (2018).

the aftermath of both Hurricane Katrina and the 1906 earthquake and fires: in this case, White San Franciscans were humanized survivors who pored over the “ruins” of Chinatown in search of gold, trinkets or other treasures. The most extreme consequence of this was verbal discouragement, or in the case of two people, arrest with no charge. Chinatown, the site of recent, painful death and loss was turned into a mysterious attraction to tour, all the while severing the surviving population from their right to return to the neighborhood:

There never will be such a Chinatown in San Francisco again. These people will be sent to a district far from the heart of the new city, where they will be under such close surveillance that practices of the past will be stopped when they begin. Provision will be made to suppress the tongs for all time, if this can be accomplished.

Citizens who have visited the remains of this plague spot were astonished at the catacombs which lay exposed. It is improbable that any attempt will be made to reach the bodies of Chinese victims. Earth will be thrown into the gaping abyss, burying for all time the victims of the disaster and blotting forever the sites of these dens of vice and horrible chambers of sin.⁷⁶

As a site of perceived alienness, corruption, and mystery in the heart of the city, White San Franciscans granted no respect to the destroyed Chinatown neighborhood. Rather, they treated the space like a playground, an old ghost story, or an ancient ruin to traverse and explore. It is well established by now that the supposed system of tunnels running under Chinatown was a fantasy of gross over-exaggeration, yet descriptions of these “catacombs” were reported by several gawking upper-class San Franciscans and even law enforcement. Elite looting was unabashed and unhidden not only because of exotification of the human suffering on this site, but because of supposed respectability of those carrying it out. Because Chinese property was not

⁷⁶ Wilson, J. R. (2016). p. 173

seen as “worth” protecting, White San Franciscans searching for souvenirs were simply seen as tourists in land that was empty and open for their entertainment.

In the wake of the destruction, city officials discussed the fate of destroyed Chinatown. The Committee of Fifty was the main entity discussing rebuilding. Headed by James Phelan (the same former San Francisco Mayor who requested that Daniel Burnham create a plan for City Beautiful in San Francisco), the entire committee represented progressive, pro-business interests.⁷⁷ Despite their overrepresentation in the Committee of Fifty, City Beautiful proponents were in the end less able to implement their vision than they had dreamed, as rebuilding followed the pressures of the market rather than aims of authoritarian urban renewal. While certain buildings such as the new City Hall were built according to these ideals, broader urban development happened with much less regulation. City officials approached rebuilding and recovery, at its core, as an attempt to reconstruct the segregation and inequality that had defined pre-earthquake San Francisco. San Francisco residents were aided in recovering their “accustomed” social and economic status and thousands of refugee homes were created to re-separate San Franciscans along race and class lines.⁷⁸ Further than that, it was an attempt to profit off of the disordered or erased physical boundaries of Chinatown’s foothold in the city and resolve the stain that Chinatown’s existence cast over the minds of nearby San Francisco residents. An example of this opportunism can be found in a *San Francisco Chronicle* article published on April 27th, 1906 which said, “The complete destruction of the Chinese quarter by fire has given rise to a hope that the Chinese quarter may now be established in some location far

⁷⁷ Seimers, R. (nd.). 1906 Earthquake History and Statistics Subcommittee of the Citizen's Committee of Fifty - Museum of the City of San Francisco.

⁷⁸ Kroll-Smith, J. S. (2018). p. 98-99

removed from the center of town, and James D. Phelan heads a movement to establish it at Hunters Point.”⁷⁹ This suggestion complemented the City Beautiful movement interests, and Phelan jumped on the opportunity the fires had provided: “By wiping out the city’s infrastructure, the disaster had seemingly left a blank slate, albeit one covered with debris and rubble, for a reordered city. Burnham, Phelan, and other City Beautiful proponents believed they had a unique opportunity to implement their vision of a new and improved San Francisco.”⁸⁰ This vision included a Chinatown which would never again be allowed in the inner city. The rhetoric used by decision makers and the media detached the refugees from their historic neighborhood through descriptions of them as wandering, aimless groups. A 1906 New York Times article from a few months after the earthquake and fires encapsulates the ways in which White Americans imagined a Chinatown should exist in any given city:

The old Franciscan Chinatown was a much greater blemish and absurdity than that of New York. For it occupied the slope of the hill at the base of which is the chief commercial quarter, and the top of which is the chief residential quarter. No Franciscan of those parts could pass from his business to his home or back again without passing through it. What is more, his womankind could not ‘go shopping’ without traversing it. Our little Chinatown on the other hand modestly withdraws itself where nobody need ever enter it who does betake himself to it for that express purpose.⁸¹

This publication seems to imply that Chinese communities in America, much like the exhibits in Chicago’s White City in 1893, should exist at the peripheries of cities to either entertain or be ignored by a centralized, White, San Francisco. In Hunters Point, Chinatown would have been far out of the way of the busiest districts of San Francisco. The Committee of Fifty hoped to

⁷⁹ *San Francisco Chronicle*. April 27, 1906.

⁸⁰ Dyl, J. (2017). p. 130

⁸¹ *For a New Chinatown*, N.Y. Times, Aug. 8, 1906, p.6.

relegate the Chinese population to a less conspicuous or valuable location by relocating them to a far-away, Southeast edge of the city.

Resisting with the Tools of Oppression: The Right to the City or the Midway Plaisance?

Progressive city officials' hope for manifesting a new Chinatown on their own terms, outside the economic and cultural center, did not play out as planned once the Chinese population threw their weight behind resisting displacement. Despite insistence by Governmental committees that rebuilding Chinatown in Hunters Point would be a positive change and a perfectly adequate location, Chinese residents actively organized against relocation. Dyl states on the attempt to relocate Chinatown as well as on the continued tendencies of urban land use planning: "The assumption that marginalized populations 'belonged' in polluted or inferior environments...has continued to shape decision making on questions of zoning and siting industrial facilities even in the twenty-first century."⁸² This statement perfectly encapsulates the development of Hunters Point as a mixed tapestry of industrial and residential zoning which has been home to high numbers of people of color. At the beginning of the twentieth century the location was already home to several noxious industries. There were tanneries, a chemical factory and a slaughterhouse district which had been exiled from more central locations in San Francisco.

A century later, Hunters Point has been home to further heavy industrial activity over time and has struggled with a toxic waste cleanup. Hunters point is home to San Francisco's highest population of Black people and highest percentage of people below the federal poverty line. Most of the Black population arrived in the area during World War II as labor for defense

⁸² Dyl. J. (2017). p. 149

industries. White flight after the war as well as housing and employment discrimination left the area predominantly occupied by Black veterans and former war workers.⁸³ Residents of Hunters Point have had to share close quarters with a shipyard contaminated by industrial and radioactive pollution. This shipyard was used by the U.S. Navy from 1946 to 1969 to decontaminate ships and military equipment used in atomic bomb testing. It was also used to study the effects of radiation on various animals and materials. The consequent soil contamination caused the EPA to declare the shipyard a Superfund site.⁸⁴ The Bayview Hunters Point area of the city, in its remote Southeast location, became the default “away” for people and industries that did not align with how dominant San Franciscan constituents saw themselves and the urban space that reflected them. Although Chinatown residents ultimately avoided relocation, it is important to apply a temporal view of the potential environmental injustice, and the existing environmental injustice for other marginalized groups who could not avoid the forces pushing them towards these hazards. It is also important to acknowledge the certain privileges - international alliances, inter-class solidarity within the Chinatown population, and cooperation with White property owners which allowed Chinatown residents to avoid this fate.⁸⁵

On April 29 of 1906, *Chung Sai Yat Po*, a Chinese Christian newspaper in the neighborhood, published the following recommendations on the rebuilding of Chinatown. This publication represents several of the key factors that led to a successful resistance to displacement on the part of Chinatown residents.

⁸³ Lemke-Santangelo, G., & Wollenberg, C. (n.d.). *A Day's Work: Hunters Point Shipyard Workers, 1940-1945*.

⁸⁴ Hunters Point Naval Shipyard Site Profile. (2017, October 20).

⁸⁵ Dyl, J. (2017)

If we are united, if we help ourselves and help each other, we can make the difficult possible. I humbly offer the following suggestions for the Chinese to tackle the present situation.

1. Hire famous attorneys to represent us as soon as possible.
2. If the Chinese living in Chinatown are also themselves landlords, they should restore their buildings as soon as possible. And there is no need to inform local officials. According to U.S. laws, if the land belongs to the building owner, the landlord has the right to build on his land. Local officials have no right to stop him. The present city officials are [with the anti-Chinese union faction]. If we apply through them, they will try to stop us. So it's better not to go through them.
3. If the Chinese rented from the western landlords, the Chinese renters should speak with their landlords as soon as possible and ask them to rebuild and rent them the building. Western landlords like to rent their houses to Chinese because the rent in Chinatown is higher than elsewhere. Secondly, Chinese are content with the status quo and they demand very little, if at all, from their landlords. Western landlords find renting to the Chinese good deals.⁸⁶

Chinese residents understood that their power rested in appealing to the values of White San Francisco. The Chinese community retained enough inter-class solidarity for Chinese business-owners to leverage their revenues and ownership of land within the city. They also emphasized the fact that “Chinese are content with the status quo” as a strength in negotiating with White property. This publication was confident that the property owners would renew agreements with Chinese tenants because the Chinese tenants would not object to high rents. While this assertion does not represent the whole of the Chinese community, it accurately represents the ways in which they found success by aligning with values of White supremacy and capitalism.

The Chinese in San Francisco held a position of power atypical to the most marginalized groups in the United States. Despite the distaste held for the people themselves, the economic

⁸⁶ *Chung Sai Yat Po*. (April 29, 1906). From Naruta, A. (2006). *Earthquake: The Chinatown Story*. Relocation. *Chinese Historical Society of America*. Translation by Danny Loong.

value that Chinatown brought to the city as a large port for “oriental trade” provided a strong case for allowing the residents to stay where they were. Goods, services, information and people all passed between the mainland China and the United States through Chinatown.⁸⁷ When faced with the choice of their presence in the middle of their city or their relocation not to the perimeters of the city, but rather to another port city altogether, city officials could not sacrifice the revenue they provided. The wealthier classes within Chinatown who were equally restricted from larger city access were able to act in the interest of poor working class residents by threatening to move their businesses elsewhere. Many other port cities such as Seattle expressed interest in welcoming them and their trade, giving the residents of San Francisco’s Chinatown leverage against attempts to relocate them. The *San Francisco Chronicle* published this on May 02, 1906:

Charles S. Wheeler informed the committee that he had been in consultation with the first secretary of the Chinese legation on the preceding day, and cautioned the committee, before taking any action, to look well into the future and inform itself thoroughly as to what influence its action might have on the future of San Francisco. He declared that if the situation were not wisely handled the bulk of San Francisco's Oriental trade might be diverted to other Pacific Coast ports. Seattle was making a strong bid for this trade, he declared, and would like to welcome the Chinese of this city. By the exercise of caution and diplomacy, he thought San Francisco might still retain its large Oriental trade, and at the same time look after its own civic affairs.⁸⁸

The worries of Charles S. Wheeler were, as is evident, purely economic. The city didn’t care for the wellbeing of Chinatown residents but rather benefits that their markets brought to the city. In fact, they seemed to perceive a need to balance “civic affairs” with retaining “oriental trade,” as

⁸⁷ Dyl, J. (2017) p.156

⁸⁸ Fear Chinese may Abandon San Francisco following the 1906 San Francisco earthquake. (May 2, 1906) *San Francisco Chronicle*

though they contradicted each other. “Thus, despite the poverty and low wages of most individual Chinese people in San Francisco, the district held important places in commerce and tourism, and its defenders were savvy enough to exploit that economic value.”⁸⁹ This was the first instance of the resident’s using the priorities of White progressive San Franciscans to their own benefit. City officials struggled to balance a desire to remove Chinatown from their prime real estate with a desire to continue reaping the benefits and the value that their merchants and tourism brought to the city, and as City officials continued to attempt to sell the idea of Hunters Point to the Chinese Consul and Vice-Consul, merchants continued to increase financial pressure. These tensions were seen coming to a head as Chinatown residents pulled one of the few power plays available to them:

Wednesday Chung Hsi, the Chinese Consul, and O Wyang King, Vice-Consul, accompanied A. Ruef on a tour of inspection of the outlying districts of the city. The General Relief Committee had suggested Hunters Point for the permanent location of the Celestials. When the ground was surveyed, however, the Consul and his aides intimated that they would not be satisfied with that district...The committee's protestations that what it intends is for the benefit of the Chinese is received with suspicion on the part of the Chinese. Ruef said yesterday that he was informed that many of the Chinese merchants had canceled orders for goods, with the expectation of leaving San Francisco permanently.⁹⁰

Chinatown residents also enjoyed the support of the Chinese government, who backed their refusal to submit to relocation and leveraged their possession of the land where the Chinese Consulate had once stood. The difficulties to naturalization that Chinese residents faced actually ensured that, because many retained Chinese national status, they also retained the investment and protection of the Chinese government. Through this alliance they were suddenly backed by a

⁸⁹ Dyl, J. (2017). p.157

⁹⁰ *San Francisco Examiner*. May 4th, 1906

powerful entity in the eyes of San Franciscan society – a landowner. A statement by Chinese officials was quoted in the *San Francisco Chronicle* on April 30, 1905:

I have heard the report that the authorities intend to remove Chinatown, but I cannot believe it. America is a free country, and every man has a right to occupy land which he owns provided that he makes no nuisance. The Chinese Government owns the lot on which the Chinese Consulate of San Francisco formerly stood, and this site on Stockton street will be used again. It is the intention of our Government to build a new building on the property, paying strict attention to the new building regulations which may be framed.⁹¹

Ultimately, the Chinese consulate was rebuilt in the heart of old Chinatown. Because the Chinese government owned the land where the consulate once stood, they could put their weight behind that of the residents. Thus, the neighborhood gained momentum in rebuilding which aided them in avoiding displacement. More landowners, though somewhat less altruistic, continued along this trend. White property owners controlled at least 80 percent of property in Chinatown and profited from high rents. Considering this, the Chung Sai Yat Po recommendation for Chinese tenants to approach their White landlords to renew their leases was an effective one, and would encourage the rebuilding of the vast majority of Chinatown properties.

With the consulate's claim to rebuild in the heart of old Chinatown, its residents and business owners followed. At the suggestion of White developers, businesses distorted and over exaggerated Chinese architecture, placing pagodas on top of buildings where they would traditionally rest on the ground, and making over the top design choices in order to promote tourism and quash its old, destructive reputation. This aesthetic was pioneered by businessman

⁹¹ *San Francisco Chronicle*. April 30, 1905

“In the party were Chow-Tszchi, first secretary of the Chinese Legation at Washington; Chung Pao Hsi, Consul-General of San Francisco, Ow Yang King, his assistant consul and Lyman I. Mowry, the attorney for the Chinese officials.”

and entrepreneur Look Tin Eli, who hired American architects to construct their idea of an Eastern fantasy. General Manager of Sing Chong Bazaar, he articulated a vision for Chinatown as an “Oriental City” filled with “veritable fairy palaces” and encouraged other business owners and to follow in suit.⁹² Although the Disneyland-like model of Chinatown would be unrecognizable to those who lived in it at the end of the nineteenth century, San Francisco’s Chinatown has thrived with tourist business, and set the standard for other Chinatowns across the country. While their insurmountable foreignness—their cultural, racial, and religious difference—was a large part of what made White Americans oppress, criminalize, and make dispensable Chinese immigrants, the Chinese population in San Francisco’s Chinatown shielded themselves from this, ironically, by caricaturing their difference and making it palatable, consumable and appealing to White tourists.

The new Chinatown was an amped up, hyper-capitalist version of the previous one, oriented around consumption and tourism. Some White tourists who searched for supposed authenticity mourned the loss of the Old Chinatown, all the while revealing their entrenchment in the values that residents appealed to in their redefinition of the neighborhood. Arnold Genthe, a photographer famous for documenting San Francisco’s Chinatown, commented in 1912 on the fundamental change in the neighborhood:

⁹² *Chinatown Rising*. (2006). San Francisco: Chinese Historical Society of America.



Figure 7. Chinatown in the 1920s. Photograph by Arnold Genthe. Reproduced from "The Glittering Ghetto Revisited." FoundSF.org. Licensed under [CC BY-NC-SA 3.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/) (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/>)

On brilliantly illuminated streets, smoothly asphalted, filled with crowds in American clothes, stand imposing bazaars of an architecture that never was, blazing in myriads of electric lights. Costly silk embroideries in gaudy colors, porcelains of florid design, bronzes with hand-made patina, and a host of gay Chinese and Japanese wares which the wise Oriental manufactures for us barbarians, tempt the tourist to enter, while inside cash-registers and department-store manners, replacing abacus and old-time courtesy, indicate up-to-date methods. In one store the Chinese owner even wears a proud tuxedo. Yet even today, in these warehouses of quite modern Oriental art, as well as in the modest store of the small dealer next door, may the patient searcher discover a precious bit of lacquer, a charming piece of brocade.⁹³

⁹³ Genthe. 1912, 206. From Lee, A. W. (1998). *The Glittering Ghetto Revisited*.

Despite claiming to see through the facade of marketing and production for tourists, Genthe searches for old semblances of authenticity in, yet again, commercial wares. The lively scene described by Genthe seems to imply that the Chinese people in San Francisco are now perfectly respectable and accepted within the city. The reference to White tourists as barbarians and the Asian business owners as wise comes across as self-deprecating. However, it also seems to imply a certain amount of scheming, manipulation, or seduction from the Chinese vendors – an echo of the racist tales of Chinese prostitution, kidnappings, gambling, or crime. Even White tourists’ eyes who mourned the loss of authenticity in Chinatown appeared to miss the entertainment of discovery, convincing exoticism, and grit more than the actual cultural integrity of the community.

What Genthe’s description of the remade neighborhood does support, vividly, is the assertion that the 1906 earthquake was the strongest westernizing influence ever applied to the Chinatown community.⁹⁴ The clean exterior that had been provided for tourists—American clothes, department store manners, standard registers, bright streets –seemingly lamented by Genthe as a loss of authenticity, allowed for the widespread approval and tourism of Chinatown in San Francisco. It is evident that the experience of the neighborhood is oriented around a sort of White gaze - to serve and please tourists in order to make a living from their entertainment. Dyl describes at length the changes to personal habits, physical space, and paperwork that allowed for the Chinese population to gain greater acceptance within the heart of San Francisco. For example: “... Many Chinese men took advantage of the destruction of records in the fire to claim U.S. birth and additional “paper sons” and “paper daughters” when they applied for new documents. These efforts to get around the restrictions of the Chinese Exclusion Act and to

⁹⁴ San Francisco journalist and photographer, Louis Stellman, in Dyl, J. (2017)

eliminate some of the distinct practices that had helped keep Chinese outside the American mainstream reflected Chinese residents' desire to claim membership in the broader community."⁹⁵ This desire to claim membership in the broader community, as stated by Dyl, could be reframed in terms of vocabulary used by Lefebvre: The Chinatown population hoped to gain access to the full benefits of the wider city, to avoid further dispossession, and to achieve the Right to the City that they had been denied.

This desire for inclusion is reflected in the deep commodification of the space that would otherwise be formed to serve its own Chinese residents. The entire neighborhood adjusted to orient services towards White acceptance and tourism. Restaurant owners adjusted their menus away from their own residents' tastes to suit a White palette, developers and business owners favored an extreme oriental aesthetic within the neighborhood that had never existed in reality, gambling and opium use were understated in the public eye. These were effective survival tactics, yet these changes did not secure their Right to the City. In reorienting their own urban space to serve White tourists and the commodifying themselves and the little space they had leveraged to maintain they assimilated to the priorities of White capitalist understandings of society. Although I cannot say whether alternative strategies of resistance would have worked, nor do I wish to undercut the resilience and strength of the community in their resistance to dispossession, I must emphasize that although Chinatown in this instance successfully resisted a specific ploy to appropriate their space and remove their residents, they did not dismantle the systems that created their vulnerability to these schemes in the first place.

⁹⁵ Dyl, J, (2017) p. 161

Kroll-Smith frames the reconstruction of Chinatown as a “rebounded recovery” in a city that rose from ashes due to its value as a market city. Dyl frames the reconstruction as an avoidance of further environmental injustice, and an expression of desire to be a part of the larger city. I, however, argue that Chinatown’s material recovery and resilience in the face of environmental racism, segregation, and abandonment amid disaster, did not address the deeper foundation on which their conditions were based. The behavior that resulted from universal commodification – accumulation of Chinese labor, culture, and space paired with the hierarchical designation of Chinese people, worldviews, and customs as inferior – expressed the deep-held belief of most White San Franciscans when viewed all together. That the Chinese create and deserve filth. That they were unassimilable and incompatible with White society. That their only value to the city was through the production of entertainment, goods, and profit for White San Franciscans. The Chinese population briefly inquired after the possibility of integration, but settled for the condition of existing, still segregated, as an experience *for* White San Franciscans.⁹⁶ While Chinatown was not moved to the periphery of the city as a whole, the neighborhood was still transformed into something that could be likened to the “primitive village” exhibits of the World’s Columbian Exposition. They became an entryway to the center of the city - the Financial District perhaps, that allows White San Franciscans to experience an exotic culture that affirms their sense of superiority and worldliness. While it was true that White San Franciscans would be obligated to path through or near Chinatown in its still central location, they could feel comfortable and entertained in an environment overwhelmingly oriented towards their gaze. Tourists supported Chinatown residents by eating their food, buying their wares, attending cultural events and enjoying the experience of authenticity. However the

⁹⁶ Dyl, J. (2017)

processes of commodification that allowed the neighborhood to “rebound” in the early twentieth century remains stable only so long as the Chinese population is tolerated as a benefit or consumed as a product by the wider population. While this enabled them to benefit from systems of White supremacy and capitalism that overall harm non-dominant identities, this conditional acceptance is not The Right to the City.

Coda: The case of Portsmouth Square 1848-2020

The events surrounding the 1906 earthquake showed a city-wide pattern of creating and recreating urban space for a White wealthy elite under the dual forces of capitalism and settler-colonial White supremacy. Using the lens of the Right to the City, it's clear that while Chinatown residents accomplished their goal to avoid displacement, they did not gain access to urban life free from commodification, nor did they truly gain access to the full benefits of the city. Narrowing our gaze to an even smaller unit – a single square block throughout time – may help reinforce this understanding of space over time. Moving beyond the beginning of the twentieth century, we will follow the major changes of Portsmouth Square from the beginning of its existence as an American landmark all the way to 2020 with recent forestallments of its renovation.

Portsmouth Square is a park in the heart of Chinatown, and one of the oldest urban spaces in San Francisco. Previously a plaza at the center of life in San Francisco's predecessor, the Mexican settlement of Yerba Buena formed around this square as a distant part of Mexico in what was known as Alta California. The settlement was claimed for the United States in 1846 during the Mexican American War, and the central square was the location of the first American Flag raised in the area during the conquest of California. The discovery of gold was announced in this same square just two years later in 1848. Through settler-colonial American eyes, Portsmouth Square existed first as a site of abundance, celebration and national pride. A San Francisco Chronicle article from 1916 reflects on the history of the Square: "Patriotism went up to 120 degrees or more every Fourth of July in the plaza, beginning with 1850 [...] But all this was nothing to the cheering that swept like a tornado over the plaza in the following October,

when, on the 29th, was celebrated the first natal day of California as a State.”⁹⁷ A central space in the patriotic establishment of the American city, Portsmouth Square (then Portsmouth Plaza) was at the physical center of the celebration of appropriation of land - the reaching of occupation of the far west coast. The site has a multilayered history of colonization as well as erasure and genocide of Indigenous Nations. American Manifest Destiny reached the Pacific with Portsmouth Square and with it, settlers ready to implement their God-given vision of agrarian civilization, democracy, and capitalism.

Chinese immigrants were already a part of the city by 1850, but the 1916 *Chronicle* journalist only briefly references their presence in the parade: “even the Chinese [were] allowed to get in with their picturesque paraphernalia and ‘whoopee alle same ‘Melicanman.’” My interpretation of the heavily distorted words is “whoopee, all the same American man.”⁹⁸ At once we see the perception of foreignness - the writer is mocking this person’s accent and use of pidgin English. He also mocks the presumption of the Chinese immigrants to claim and celebrate American-ness with their visible cultural difference and heavily accented English. These supposed contradictions could not exist in the same space without a certain ironic derision. The presence of Chinese people does not reappear in this article until the supposed downturn of the square. “Then came the Blight. Some say it was the Chinese...Strange lettering appeared on signs over new industries—lettering that looked like the labels on packs of firecrackers; strange voices spoke in a jargon that was not understandable...faces were cadaverous and yellow, and—well, maybe it was the Chinese after all.” The blight could mean any number of things - essentially every public health crisis was blamed on the Chinese population, from cholera to the bubonic

⁹⁷ San Francisco Chronicle, 1916, Walter J Thompson
<https://www.sfgenealogy.org/sf/history/hgsto20.htm>

⁹⁸ Several songs written in the early twentieth century featured titles such as “A Melican Man” or “Me Melican Man.” All of these use this term to mean “American Man.”

plague. Chinese people themselves—their bodies and their numbers— were often equated to pestilence by White Americans, and the description given indicates that the changes surrounding the square was the simply the result of Chinese immigrants settling, living, speaking, starting businesses, and occupying that space. For that reason, suddenly the square was alien and intimidating to White San Franciscans. If the square was dirty, crowded, or densely surrounded we now understand this as the result of exclusion, compression, and lack of resources. Then, however, the symptoms of environmental injustice were racially coded and associated with the inferiority of the people themselves.

In 1906 and the following years, Portsmouth Square existed as a shelter in the middle of the crisis. During the earthquake refugees took shelter there to avoid the rubble and potential failure of destabilized buildings. The perturbation of White San Franciscans at these refugees' dense living arrangements and their pervasive "foreignness" is evident in this account of the immediate public response to the earthquake: "The Chinese came out of their underground burrows like rats and tumbled into the square, beating such gongs and playing such noisy instruments as they had snatched up. They were met on the other side by the refugees of the Italian quarter. The panic became a madness. At least two Chinamen were taken to the morgue dead of knife wounds, given for no other reason, it seems, than the madness of panic."⁹⁹ In this excerpt, the Chinese population are "Chinamen," but the Italian population are "refugees." Despite the fact that the Italian population was just as much composed of immigrants as the Chinese population, even despite the fact that the first wave of Italian immigration began with the Gold Rush much like Chinese immigration, Italians were naturalized and accepted as San

⁹⁹ Wilson, J. R. (2016).

Franciscan citizens “from the Italian quarter” while Chinese refugees are perpetually foreign. This enduring separation of White from Chinese San Franciscans was evident in the widespread intolerance of desegregated refugee camps, and the Chinese residents seeking refuge faced the consequences in this particular instance. The block became a temporary morgue as the days went on, and fires and destruction progressed. White tents were erected and Portsmouth Square temporarily became Camp No. 30.

In 1959 the plans were approved to modify the park to include an underground, 800-car parking garage.¹⁰⁰ Between the growth of tourism of in Chinatown and the continued development of the Financial District, the Portsmouth Square area was extremely heavily trafficked. This garage proposition received no great enthusiasm from community members, and an editorial critiquing the Board of Supervisors said that the idea of the underground parking lot had “mysteriously acquired momentum that abruptly put it far along the road toward an accomplished fact while protests and objections have been denied a hearing.... City officials must now be aware that the public is no longer in a mood to sacrifice all the city’s community values - its landmarks and historic buildings and vistas and open spaces - to the accommodation of the insatiable automobile.”¹⁰¹ Despite this resistance, Portsmouth Square was hollowed out and rebuilt. The split level park along with the Portsmouth Square Parking Garage was finished in 1963. In 1968, a protest was held in the square against the “Chinatown establishment for promoting tourism instead of addressing social problems in the community.”¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰ Matthews, L., & Carroll, M. (2014). *Portsmouth Square Historic Resource Evaluation*. Francisco Planning Department.

¹⁰¹ *Portsmouth Square Historic Resource Evaluation*. p. 73

¹⁰² *Portsmouth Square Historic Resource Evaluation*. p. 83

By the 2000s, the side of the park bordered by Kearny Street has accommodated the parking garage entrance for years. To one side of this entrance, the sidewalk and lower terrace of the park is darkened by a heavy, concrete pedestrian bridge connecting the public square to the towering Financial District Hilton Hotel across the street. The proposition for this hotel, which, with the bridge, was first built in 1970 and 1971 as a Holiday Inn and then renovated in 2006 as the current Hilton— received little community support or approval. Some Chinatown residents had hoped for public housing to go into the space so near to the heart of their neighborhood. Some “asked the City to convert the abandoned building into a cultural center, museum or other public facility for the community.”¹⁰³ The pedestrian bridge is big and almost always empty - at first glance, it's unclear why the park should be connected to a privately owned business. At a closer look, we see that the bridge connects the square to the Chinese Culture Center that is combined with the third floor of the Hilton as a sort of “prearranged marriage.”¹⁰⁴ The Department of Works issued an encroachment permit to Justice Investors in the 1970s, granting the company “air rights” to the bridge.¹⁰⁵ Justice Investors had hoped to exclude Chinatown residents from access to the space. The residents were resistant to the construction of the hotel. However, “a resolution the Board of Supervisors adopted long ago supported having a center for

¹⁰³ Examiner Staff. (2014, September 12). *How the Chinese Culture foundation ended up in the Hilton Hotel*.

“...according to a 1995 essay by the late Chinese-American historian Him Mark Lai on the 30th anniversary of the foundation”

¹⁰⁴ *How the Chinese Culture foundation ended up in the Hilton Hotel*. (2014)

¹⁰⁵ Justice Enterprises are the private owners of the pedestrian bridge and Financial District Hilton Hotel

Wiley, M. ; (2020, May 16). *I smell a rat': Peskin wants investigation into why Chinatown park project stalled*.

Chinese culture there. Whoever won the bid for the site was to also accommodate the Chinese Culture Foundation of San Francisco”. The result? “It's part of the building,” said Geoff Palermo, managing director at the Hilton and an owner of Justice Enterprises. “Now you can't have one without the other, and this is the intent of the agreement to begin with. We can't think of it any other way.”¹⁰⁶ This stronghold of private business over a vital community public space was government endorsed and packaged as generosity, while community voices and interests were pointedly ignored. Portsmouth Square’s physical transformation, infusing public space with private, has created the condition of the park being boxed in by privately owned entities.

This pre-arranged marriage has led to the total stagnation of vital public space, and has had negative consequences on the community. Because 40% of the neighborhood’s housing are Single Room Occupancy units (SROs) occupied by families of 4 or more members, the community relies heavily on the square for socializing, senior recreation, exercise, children’s play, and more.¹⁰⁷ This is rare open space in the area, notes The Chinatown Community Development Center: “while San Francisco sets aside 19% of its area to parks, open space makes up a mere 5% in the 18-block Chinatown neighborhood.”¹⁰⁸ This lack of space is amplified by the fact that the neighborhood is three times denser than the wider city.¹⁰⁹ A *San Francisco Examiner* article describes the housing conditions of the neighborhood: “More than two-thirds of Chinatown’s residents live in approximately 74% of the City’s Single Room Occupancies

¹⁰⁶ *How the Chinese Culture foundation ended up in the Hilton Hotel.* (2014)

¹⁰⁷ *The Vision for Portsmouth Square.* Chinatown Community Development Center. (January 12, 2018)

¹⁰⁸ “The Vision for Portsmouth Square”.

¹⁰⁹ Montojo, N. *Community Organizing amidst Change in SF’s Chinatown.* Center for Community Innovation. (June 3, 2015)

(SROs), in which entire families live in single rooms that average 8 by 10 feet.”¹¹⁰ Furthermore, 2015 report on SRO Families in San Francisco showed the negative impacts of these conditions, describing complaints such as respiratory problems, insufficient light, infections due to unsanitary conditions, mold, lead exposure, blood in shared bathrooms, rodents and bedbugs. Portsmouth Square is often referred to as Chinatown’s living room due to its importance in the lives of its residents who can find no open or clean space elsewhere. This is evident in the large groups of residents of all ages that cluster in the park, sit and play cards on boxes, sleep on benches or wait in long lines to use the public restrooms. Despite its importance, this living room has become half unusable due to the modifications of the past 60 years, and the side bordering Kearny street and the Hilton are undermaintained and avoided. Another article published in 2013 describes Portsmouth Square as *long* overdue for renovation, yet eight years later we have yet to see changes to the Square.¹¹¹

These issues have been actively addressed within the community both as the unwanted changes were being proposed and in their aftermath. The community has been organizing for over ten years around the renovation of Portsmouth Square.¹¹² The Portsmouth Square Improvement Project consisted of a thorough existing conditions report detailing the dilapidating

¹¹⁰ Lee, D. (2020, June 07). San Francisco's Health and Recovery Bond Leaves Chinatown Behind.

Data confirmed in 2015 SRO Families Report, SRO Families United Collaborative, 2015.

¹¹¹ The square reportedly “has seen better days,” and is disconnected from its surroundings by “hulking” garage entrances.

Pilaar, D. (2013, December 12). Portsmouth square set for long Overdue Renovation.

¹¹² SWA Group. (2020, November 02). *Portsmouth Square*.

square and community identified areas for improvement. Additionally, Allan Low, vice president of the Recreation and Park Commission stated that there was an “extraordinarily high” number of community design workshops, which over 100 community members attended.¹¹³ These took place between 2010 and 2018, resulting in a consensus, community approved design for the Square. Despite these efforts, Portsmouth Square was passed over in a recent 2020 Health and Recovery Bond that was one of the only foreseeable ways to fund the renovation. This bond was meant to fund investments in public facilities that serve people experiencing “mental health challenges, substance use disorder, and/or homelessness” with a specific category of funding for parks.¹¹⁴ Considering the sheer number of SRO residents in Chinatown, the fact that the city of San Francisco defines families living in SROs as legally homeless, *and* the fact that there have been years of planning and designing already done, Portsmouth Square should have been one of the most urgent candidates for parks funding.¹¹⁵ However the Square was notably absent from mention.

Community member Ding Lee wrote, “With the pandemic devastating our economy, renovations to Portsmouth Square may be ignored for another generation if the 2018 design is not executed within the current bond proposal.”¹¹⁶ This economic downturn cannot be overstated. In the 1800s, Chinatown residents were compressed and excluded under justifications of their foreignness. They were equated with dirt, disease, and sinisterness. As COVID-19

¹¹³ Wiley, M. ; (2020, May 16). *'I smell a rat': Peskin wants investigation into why Chinatown park project stalled.*

¹¹⁴ 2020 Health and Recovery General Obligation Bond.

¹¹⁵ 2015 SRO Families Report, SRO Families United Collaborative, 2015.

¹¹⁶ Lee, D. (2020, June 07). San Francisco's Health and Recovery Bond Leaves Chinatown Behind.

outbreaks began in Western Europe and the U.S. after the first identified outbreak in Wuhan, the innate foreignness of Asian communities and people resurfaced in the American consciousness, with the renewed and amplified hate and equation of Asian people with disease. Their urban spaces are suffering accordingly, with the consequent absolute disinvestment in their businesses and public spaces by the wider city. Here we see, yet again, the interplay of racism and capitalism in excluding marginalized populations from stable access to urban life. The residents do not have an unalienable right to urban space and resources of housing, outdoor space, or their own businesses. When the wider city adjusts its consumption habits based on racist assumptions of cleanliness or contagion, the residents are now at the risk of losing those urban spaces they have been able to maintain agency over. When the wider city decides, for whatever reason, that they will pour money into public spaces everywhere but Chinatown's living room, they are once again excluded from the best outcomes of the city.

There has been speculation surrounding the exclusion of the Square from funding, primarily centering on suspicion about the private ownership of the pedestrian bridge. In the summer of 2018 dozens of Chinatown residents petitioned to revoke the encroachment or "air rights" permit and submitted it to the Department of Public Works then-director Mohammed Nuru.¹¹⁷ According to Allan Low, "The matter was fully heard, briefed, argued. Public testimony opened, public testimony closed, in October 2018. To date, there has been no decision." A long-delayed environmental review has stalled progress on revoking the permit long enough to create issues with the consensus design's plan to remove the bridge, and therefore removed it from consideration in the recent bond. Despite resident involvement at every level in pushing a new spatial reality for the square, the stronghold of private property and business interest has

¹¹⁷ Wiley, M. ; (2020, May 16). *'I smell a rat': Peskin wants investigation into why Chinatown park project stalled.*

prevailed. Geoffrey Palermo, the managing director of the Hilton and owner of Justice Enterprises was charged with fraud in June 2020. He made false claims in loan applications, wrongfully received PPP funds, denied his employees benefits, and essentially attempted to profit off the pandemic. He also allegedly embezzled large sums of money from the San Francisco Hilton Hotel between 2013 and 2016.¹¹⁸ The exploitative nature of the private entities controlling the fate of Portsmouth Square is clear, especially through the actions of this individual owner who, throughout his career, legally and illegally used private venture capital to benefit himself. The government stalled, allowing Justice Enterprises to maintain their permit during an important time for city infrastructural improvements. Within this small but deeply important space city officials have actively prioritized private business interests by using the brick wall of bureaucracy to block community backed demands. Chinese residents, despite active involvement at every level, have had no institutional means to enact agency over this vital public space. Mark Purcell, shows one example of how reimagining the role of inhabitants in determining the production of urban space could change under the model of the Right to the City:

Many of the decisions that produce urban space are made within the state, but many more of them are made outside it. The investment decisions of firms, for example, would fall within the purview of the right to the city because such decisions play a critical role in producing urban space. [...] The right to the city, conversely, would give urban inhabitants a literal seat at the corporate table, because it gives them a direct voice in any decision that contributes to the production of urban space. It would transcend the state-bound limitations of current structures of conventional citizen enfranchisement¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸ Department of Justice, U.S. Attorney's Office. Northern District of California. (2020, June 05). Bay Area Hospitality and Automotive Executive Charged with Fraud.

¹¹⁹ Mark Purcell. *Excavating Lefebvre: The Right to the City and its urban politics of the inhabitant*

Under this formulation of the Right to The City, the parking garage, pedestrian bridge, and hotel surrounding Portsmouth Square would have potentially been prevented from encroaching on Chinatown public space in the first place. It paints a compelling picture in which inhabitants of this city are directly involved with decisions surrounding urban space rather than vulnerable to social and economic processes which have historically acted and continue to act against the interest and wellbeing of Chinatown residents.

Conclusion

The Chinese and other diasporic Asian communities have an extremely long, fraught history in the United States. When they entered into a colonial context driven by narratives of White supremacy, Chinese immigrants in the mid-nineteenth century were fitted into racial hierarchies in order to best suit the interests of the settler state. They were welcomed as cheap, disposable labor on projects which expanded the infrastructure of the U.S. but were rejected from integration into cities and social life. The deep-seated belief of White San Franciscans in their cultural and racial superiority justified endless segregation, education, miscegenation and immigration laws. The designations of Chinese immigrants as unworthy inhabitants in the social sphere translated to unhealthy conditions, criminalization. When their neighborhood was destroyed in the 1906 earthquake and subsequent fires, this same designation justified violence upon the Chinese as refugees and repeated attempts at displacement. By examining the social processes before and after the earthquake of 1906, we can explore how the legacy and intersection of moral values, constructed identities, capital accumulation, and physical space carry into present disputes over the right to the city, and speculate how to unconditionally secure this right and learn from a fraught and repeated history.

Chinatown residents, by making themselves indispensable solely based on the economic value they brought to the city and White property owners ensured that they could only continue to reap urban benefits so long as they continued to be economically viable. Present day anti-Asian sentiment and Sinophobia has completely stagnated Chinatown businesses; housing conditions never significantly worsened or improved; and the built environment of the neighborhood has never evolved to sufficiently serve its residents. Despite the deep role of grassroots organizing for tenants' rights in the communities history, many are still living in

unhealthy conditions. This is because, although the residents were able to beat the city at its own game in one instance, they did not dismantle any of the systems generating their insecurity. Despite this, Chinatown residents at the beginning of the twentieth century were incredibly resourceful within the bounds of their reality - they made the best of a racist, capitalist environment. The fact that the responding physical environment was an extreme landscape of racial exotification and capitalist consumption should prove this. As Wong Chin Foo stated in *Why Am I a Heathen?*, “Love men for the good they do you is a practical Christian idea, not for the good you should do them as a matter of human duty. So Christians love the heathen; yes, the heathen’s possessions; and in proportion to these the Christian’s love grows in intensity.”¹²⁰ Many Chinatown residents fundamentally understood that their acceptance was tied to the desires of White San Franciscans. They noted that White San Franciscans wished to extract their “cultural authenticity,” the revenue and goods of Chinese merchants, and high rents. They noted the elevated values of progressive San Franciscans—business, industriousness, profit, “cleanliness”, morality, and cultural homogeneity. Lastly, they noted the perceived parts of themselves and their community that were used as a justification for violence and displacement—dirtiness, disease, large numbers, gambling, drug use, brothels, foreignness. Given these factors, they oriented themselves in the most favorable, least offensive position possible in an attempt to stay afloat atop the forces of racism and capitalism threatening to displace them. Furthermore, they were successful in what they set out to do. They successfully leveraged their economic importance in the city in the form revenue from trade, Chinese merchants, tourism, and rents for White property owners to avoid relocation to Hunters Point.

¹²⁰ Wong Chin Foo. *Why am I a Heathen*. (1887) p. 76.

While I do not critique Chinatown residents for their survival tactics, I do take their actions as a lesson. It was not Chinatown that needed to prove itself to the broader city. Rather it is the broader municipal, state, and federal governments that must dismantle the systems that privilege exploitative institutions and individuals, which therefore enable the deprioritization of working class and ethnic minorities. Within settler-colonial, White supremacist, capitalist societies, no privilege or alignment with power will result in lasting change to the way urban space is produced. Chinese residents in San Francisco had alliances to those with power, wealth, and land. They do not have the same history of genocide, slavery, and erasure from historical narratives and the landscape. They have not been dispossessed of traditional land and were not stolen from their land. Despite this, they are affected by the processes of spatial production which dominate the United States just like everyone else, and have distinct and nuanced experiences under our social, governmental and economic systems.

These dominant strategies of producing space, inextricable from the broader capitalist system and deeply engrained social narratives, seem insurmountable. However, to return to the words of Lefebvre: “Only groups, social classes and class fractions capable of revolutionary initiative can take over and realize to fruition solutions to urban problems. It is from these social and political forces that the renewed city will become the *oeuvre*. The first thing to do is to defeat currently dominant strategies and ideologies.”¹²¹ This individual thesis cannot guess the proper processes for the production of urban space, as I do not represent the diverse inhabitants of any given city. What can be done is an examination of the existing social, political and economic processes and the way they have been concretized within and perpetuated by urban space. A first step can be taken to subvert the dominant strategies and ideologies. As Purcell

¹²¹ Lefebvre. *Writings on Cities*. p. 61

states, “because a range of political identities will define urban inhabitants, a range of political interests may animate their agenda. The result is likely to be the pursuit of heterogeneous and hybrid urban geographies, all of which nevertheless share in common a city produced to meet the complex and multiple needs of urban inhabitants.”¹²² Through imbuing the “inhabitant” with the diverse identities of the city rather than those formulated by White supremacist imaginings of ideal citizens, city dwellers can contribute substantially to a new ideal of a co-created urban space.

¹²² Purcell, M. (2002)

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